



SEEN
in a
MEXICAN
PLAZA

George F. Weeks



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SEEN IN A MEXICAN
PLAZA





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Organ Cactus, Frequently Used for Fences and Hedges

SEEN IN A MEXICAN PLAZA

A Summer's Idyll of an Idle Summer

BY
"EL GRINGO"
(GEO. F. WEEKS)

ILLUSTRATED



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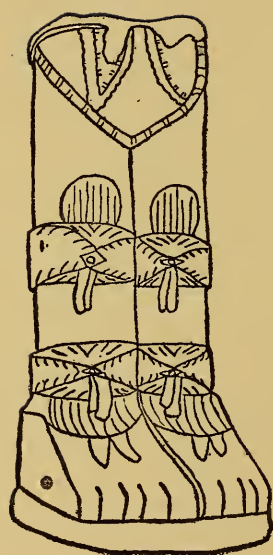
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TO
MY FRIEND
Don Martin Arredondo
THAT TYPICAL MEXICAN GENTLEMAN
TO WHOM I OWE MANY PLEASANT
HOURS AND MANY VALUED
COURTESIES AND
KINDNESSES



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Initial letters and tail pieces by the author's daughter,
Mrs. ANNIE WEEKS HUNTER



Idyll First

FAR-AWAY, QUIET CUATRO CIENEGAS

 WAY out on the edge of things in the State of "Coahuila and Zaragosa," far to the south of the Rio Grande, is the picturesque, thoroughly typical little town of Cuatro Cienegas—"Four Meadows." The meadows are there all right, though not immediately apparent to the newcomer. But keen sportsmen with an eye to a bag of ducks, geese or other feathered game know very well their location—and are quite apt to keep that knowledge to themselves—though the friendly engineer who halts the train an hour or two to let some of his passengers shoot a goodly bunch of birds does not come under that category.

The name is a pretty one—pretty to a degree, as well as appropriate; rolls smoothly from the tongue of the native, as also from that of the foreigner—after he knows how. It is a pretty place, too—if you like places that are "different"; that are dusty

as becomes a locality where no rain falls on occasion for over two years at a stretch—where it may be said of a truth that “there falls not either rain or hail or snow”; but which nevertheless has vineyards and orchards and gardens and flowers regardless of such trifling natural vagaries as absence of rain—deriving their life from a tumbling, dashing, noisy, attractive mountain torrent.

A pretty location—mostly desert, though that fact makes the gardens all the more attractive. And incidentally one can readily possess himself of a loaf and a jug (of not bad native wine), and a tree in the desert—without going more than a mile or two from town—as also with an attractive “thou,” native or otherwise, if he be disposed to follow the poet literally and with exactness—also with poetic license.

It is, in a sentence, a place where one can loaf and invite his soul, if he be in the loafing mood and if perchance he have a soul; and if he be a foreigner, the only one in the town, and have but a few words of the vernacular—just enough to eat and drink and on occasion swear by—he can surely loaf and invite his soul to his soul’s content—and more, too! Sometimes altogether too much—and then some.

Being, let us say (as was the writer), the only

foreigner in town, none of the natives with a single exception speaking English; with one's eyes in such a state that the physician had been obliged to pass sentence of "No reading"; with only sufficient sporadic business to keep one occupied a few days each month—all too few for comfort of mind or body—what resource was left?

We shall see.

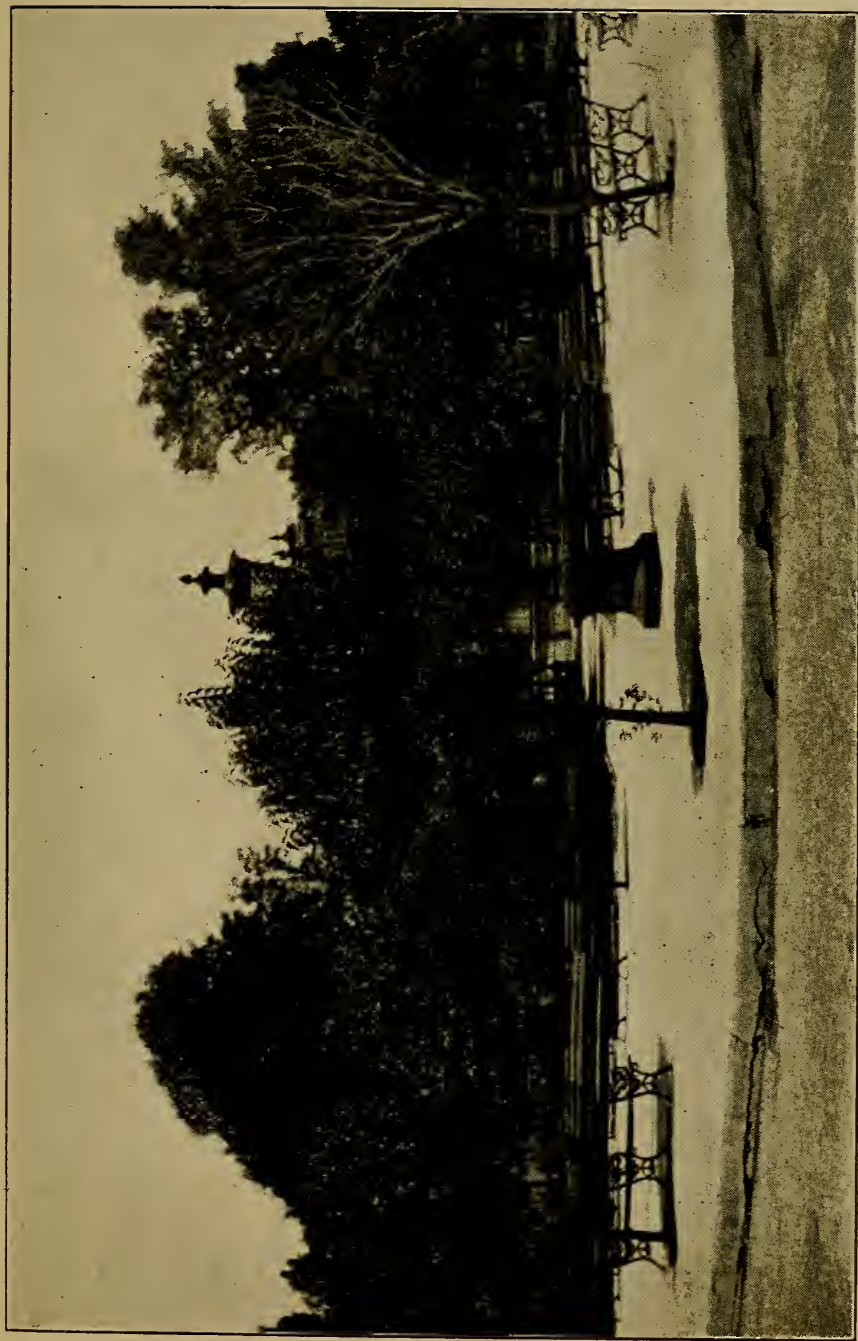
The only "loafing place" in a Mexican town is the plaza—barring, of course, the cantinas, as saloons are called.

Wise in his day and generation, knowing that "breathing spots" are as essential almost as eating or drinking spots, the Spanish pioneer, in planning a town, always lays out the breathing spot first. He delineates this on broad and ample lines, and surrounds the plaza with buildings as a secondary consideration. Land may become valuable in time, the eyes of "business"—not native eyes—may be turned covetously on the plaza, but it is useless. The Spaniard or Mexican would part with the patio (interior flower-planted courtyard) of his house as soon as with the plaza of his town.

So to the plaza all the idle and unemployed and infirm turn—and, anxious to follow the custom of the country, if for no other reason, thither went the

writer to pass the long, weary hours between daylight and what hour far into the night when sleep at last drove him to his cot—literally cot—a spring mattress supported on two wooden “horses,” in a bare, sparsely furnished room of an ancient stone structure made historical from the fact that during one of the violent revolutions of the past century four men sheltered therein held at bay a force of two hundred soldiers, killing and wounding many of them, and only succumbing when hunger, thirst and wounds made further resistance no longer possible.

Like most plazas, this was a perfect jungle of trees, shrubbery, grass and flowers. The pathways diverged from the center like the spokes of a wheel, while the great trees met overhead, affording perfect protection from the sun's rays, as also ample and most desirable accommodation for all who desire to take their afternoon's siesta on the benches disposed along the tree-bordered walks. The ground was laid out in flower beds in genuine hit-or-miss fashion, intersected by irrigation ducts of the smallest. These beds were a mass of violets, purple fleur-de-lis, roses, geraniums and what not. The roses were a new variety to me—genuine products of Arabia, I was told. Certainly, I had never seen



The Cuatro Ciénegas Plaza in Summer

their like or their equal even in that land so favored of roses—California. With large petals, semi-double, of the most beautifully delicate shell-like pink, shading into translucent white near the heart, and of a sweetness indescribable, they were easily the queen of the entire rose family. The delicate, evanescent scent was borne on the gentle breezes to an unbelievable distance, and to sit near the rose thickets and inhale the exquisite odors was to make one dream he was indeed in Araby the blest. And the violets! In the deep shade of the shrubbery, in rich soil kept moist by the constantly flowing irrigation rivulets, the plants grew heavy and dense, while the blossoms were luxuriant and odorous far beyond anything known in less favored climes. They seemed to exhale the very quintessence and concentration of countless millions that had gone before. I never inhale the odor of roses or violets but the memory of the flower beds of the Cuatro Cienegas plaza, all the more attractive because of the very irregularity of their arrangement, comes back with overwhelming force, and I long to sit and dream the idle hours away as I so often sat and dreamed. Indeed, it seems now as if it had never been anything *but* a dream.

Idyll Second

A STRANGE BUSINESS



O the plaza then! And since, as will be shown, "business" required that an eye be kept on the main highway leading to the desert region to the west, and on the opposite side of the encircling range of rugged mountains, a bench was selected beneath the thick shade of a china-berry tree just across from the church between which and the plaza passed the highway aforesaid. This bench, by the way, soon became recognized as the especial private appanage of "El Gringo," as I quickly became known far and near (not, by the way, as an expression of contempt and unfriendliness, but merely because I was *the* Gringo, and the only stranger in the town), and few ventured to occupy it even during my temporary absence.

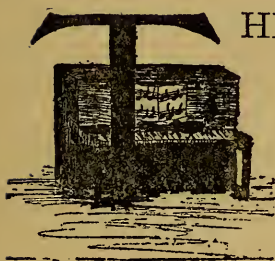
The "business" referred to was the receipt and shipment to the factory of quantities of the won-

derful rubber producing shrub called "Guayule," a desert growth once regarded as worthless, but which in a few short years brought wealth to so many of the land owners and speculators of Northern Mexico. This was gathered in a region a hundred miles and more to the northwest in the heart of the desert, was baled and hauled on wagons by mules to the nearest railroad point, which, in this case, was the town of Cuatro Cienegas. There being no ready means of communication with the guayule region, and locomotion by mule power being necessarily slow and uncertain in such a country, the arrival of the wagon trains, made up of twenty great vehicles drawn by hosts of mules (attached to the wagons, by the way, in strange and incomprehensible fashion—two "on the wheels," five "in the swing," and four "in the lead") was all a matter of chance. So from daylight until dark it was the writer's cheerful business to sit on the bench described, walk out into the middle of the road at intervals of twenty minutes to half an hour, and look up the highway some mile and a half to a point where it left a defile in the mountains and debouched upon the plain. The instant a cloud of dust appeared in the distance of sufficient volume to denote the possible advent of a wagon train—though it might be

a band of cattle or sheep, or a train of donkeys, or anything except the expected guayule shipment—a coach was requisitioned. A coach in Mexico, by the way, is any kind of a vehicle that carries passengers, from a half-spring Studebaker wagon to the finest product of a French carriage maker of the last century. In the coach a hasty trip was made up the road to meet the supposed train, though three out of four or more of such journeys were fruitless, as there were several people engaged in the same business and many trains were on the road. Still there was more or less uncertainty connected with the affair, and as the wagon trains awaited by me averaged about three trips every two months, the monotonous character of the daily watch and examination of the road may perhaps be imagined. Certainly it would require a violent stretch of the imagination to suppose there was any undue excitement connected with the “business.”

Idyll Third

THE EDUCATED CROW THAT PLAYED THE PIANO



HE only resource then was to become interested in the life that went on in and around the plaza. One might well be excused for fancying that in a place of no more than three or four thousand inhabitants, where every one was securely housed by eight in the evening, not much of interest could be found even from the vantage point of the center of the town's activities—the plaza.

But not so!

As will be shown, there was an abundance of interest, if one but looked for it.

The first acquaintance made was a crow—a jet black crow! And it was a friendly sort of bird, too. One of the choice products of this region is the pecan nut, and the writer being fond of them frequently filled his pocket with a quantity of

already cracked ones, and consumed them while waiting for the long expected wagon trains. Not long after he began his daylight, nut-consuming vigil, one afternoon a crow alighted on the edge of the gutter a dozen or fifteen feet from the settee. He cocked his head first on one side, then on the other, darted his bright eyes at the stranger, and after due consideration evidently concluded that nothing was to be feared. Besides, he liked pecans himself! So he hopped a foot or two at a time across the sidewalk nearer and nearer until he reached the opposite end of the settee. Then after a quick glance of appraisal he hopped onto the seat, and then to the top rail. Then he slowly sidled along, watching closely for the first sign of enmity or interference. But care was taken not to alarm the bird and he finally approached nearer and nearer until at last within touching distance. A pecan held out in the open hand was grabbed like a flash, the crow made a short flight to safety, and then stood on the ground while he ate the nut, afterwards coming back for more. Friendship thus established, soon we were chums and greatly enjoyed our communion. Incidentally the crow enjoyed the pecans!

Not long after it was learned that the bird was the pet of the young daughter of a hotel keeper.



Packing Adobes on a Burro



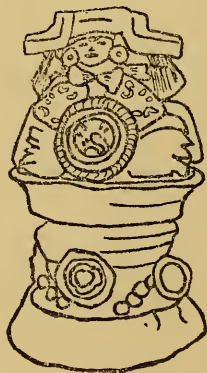
Rural Transportation

After expressing curiosity about the friendly crow, I was amazed when I was told it had actually been taught to pick out an air on the piano with its bill, and upon evincing incredulity I was invited to witness the proof—which I did and saw with my own eyes and heard with my own ears the wonderful performance. And the crow appeared to appreciate the fact that his piano feat was unique. He cocked his head on one side, almost laughed aloud, and his attitude just as plainly said, “I am *some* crow, am I not?” as if he had uttered the actual words.

But the bird developed a habit which finally led to his banishment. The hotel in question, like the majority of houses in the smaller towns, had no windows such as are known in this country. The window openings were protected with perpendicular iron bars, and inside were solid shutters of wood, which were left open except at night. The crow made a practice of flying into the windows through the bars, picking up any shining object from table or bureau, flying out with it in his beak, taking it over to the “hoozegow,” or local jail on the other side of the plaza, and carefully depositing it in a letter box that was fastened by the side of the door. By the way, the word quoted was long a puzzler. Having lived many years in California, it seemed to

me to have a distinctive Chinese flavor; and as it was usually pronounced no clue was afforded to its actual etymology. "Hoozegow?" What did it mean? After awhile inquiry developed the fact that the word was "Juzgado" (court or jail), corrupted by common usage into "hoozegow."

The crow became such a nuisance and was the cause of so much complaint on the part of the guests at the hotel that he was finally donated to a botanical and zoological garden in the city of Monterrey, greatly to the regret of those who had enjoyed his friendship and his antics. But he was a fund of amusement for a long time, and helped many a weary hour to pass agreeably.



Idyll Fourth

WHY THEY THOUGHT I WAS RUDE



CAME to my reserved seat in the plaza one day Don Martin, a typical Mexican gentleman, who had done much to smooth my path and assist me in the prosecution of my enterprise.

And just a word by way of preface: I arrived in Cuatro Cienegas an absolute stranger. Had never been there, did not know a soul, and was far more lost than the historical cat in a strange garret—supposed to represent the very acme of loneliness. At that time I did not possess enough of the language of the country to swear by, even to swear with, and scarcely enough by which to eat.

Securing a couple of rooms, I was busy, with the help of a peon, setting them to rights and arranging the few necessary bits of furniture, when a fine-looking, portly gentleman of fifty or thereabouts knocked at the open door. "Pardon me," he said, "my name is Martin Arredondo. Some of my peo-

ple told me that a strange American had arrived in town with the evident intention of remaining. Knowing that there were no other foreigners here, and as I am the only native who speaks English, I thought I would call upon you without delay and place my services at your disposal. If there is anything in which I can assist you, I hope you will not be backward in coming to me."

And this was no perfunctory offer, either, made out of mere courtesy and with no expectation that any use would be made of it. In all my stay in this town Don Martin more than fulfilled his promise, many times doing me favors, as I learned subsequently, without solicitation upon my part. I was indebted to him over and over again for courtesies and services of the most valuable kind.

Beyond giving me his name and pointing out the location of his residence, my visitor did not inform me as to his standing in the place, but merely contented himself by offering his assistance and inviting me to call. Very soon, however, I learned that he was one of the leading citizens, an extensive property owner, manager of a branch bank, and in every respect easily the foremost and most influential resident.

And many a time I thought, and still think: How

long would a strange Mexican in an American town, knowing little of the language or customs, wait before the leading banker and property owner would call upon him and tender his services? How long, indeed? This question need not be answered. There isn't any answer!

But to resume.

Don Martin sat down by my side and, after a few moments of conversation, said:

"Señor Semanas, pardon me, but will you permit me to tell you something that I am sure will be of benefit to you?"

I assured him that there was no necessity for his asking my pardon—that I was only too glad to have him give me any information or make any suggestions that lay within his power.

"Very well, then. Some ladies were calling upon my family the other day, and I overheard their conversation. After speaking of various matters, they finally began to talk about you, and after wondering as to your business here, how long you expected to remain, etc., they remarked that they thought you had acted very rudely indeed during your stay."

I was thunderstruck. For a moment I could not find words. Then I said: "Why, Don Martin,

what could they have meant? I have treated no one rudely since coming here. In fact, I have hardly spoken to any one, and do not know any of the ladies even by sight. How can they accuse me of having been rude?"

"I will explain it to you," said Don Martin. "The ladies went on to say, in explanation of what they thought was your rude conduct, that you had been here several weeks, that they had seen you on the plaza in the evenings when there was music (Wednesdays and Sundays), that you had passed them again and again (the custom being that the women all walk by themselves in one direction and the men by themselves in the opposite direction), and in all that time *you had never once spoken to one of them!* They were not accustomed to such rudeness of conduct, and wondered where you could have come from, that you were so guilty."

As soon as I could catch my breath I said: "Why, Don Martin, in California where I lived many years, and in all other portions of the United States, if a man dare speak to a lady to whom he has not been introduced, or unless she speaks to him first, he is apt to find himself in very serious trouble—even in jail. And, naturally, I supposed the same rule prevailed here."

WHY THEY THOUGHT I WAS RUDE 27

"We have different customs here, especially in small towns like this. If a stranger considers himself to be a gentleman and the equal of the people whom he meets on the plaza during the music, it is his duty to speak to every lady whom he passes. If he does not do this, he is regarded as a boor and very ill bred."

I thanked Don Martin for his kindness, and gave the very pleasant ladies of Cuatro Cienegas no further occasion for criticism on this account. Incidentally, I made some very interesting and enjoyable acquaintances.



Idyll Fifth

THE DEVOUT PRAYING CRIPPLE.

"And the publican, standing afar off . . . smote upon his breast, saying 'God be merciful to me a sinner.'"



MY reserved seat in the park was, as stated, across the street from the church, though not directly in front of it. The main door of the religious edifice was usually open, affording a view of the dim interior and of the altar lights in the rear. It is the universal custom in places of this size and location, when passing a church, to lift one's hat, and, wishing to conciliate the people and to show respect for their sentiments, I soon fell into the habit. Another peculiarity of churches in many places is that there are no pews and no seats except such as the worshipers provide for themselves. It is a frequent sight to see a party of ladies and children passing along the street toward the church, followed by a servant carrying an armful of folding chairs. So, too, with theaters in many towns.

One is expected to bring his own chair, or be content to stand throughout the performance.

Soon after establishing myself as a more or less permanent resident in the plaza, I noted an old, old man, a crippled hunchback, who came regularly thither, and taking up his position on the outermost edge of the curbstone, exactly in front of the main door of the church, engaged for long periods in the most earnest devotions. His conduct reminded one irresistibly of that of the publican referred to in the quotation, and in one's mind one could readily see the Pharisees praying in public and thanking God that they were not as other men—though far be it from me to even hint that there were any of this class in Cuatro Cienegas!

Always he began by lifting his eyes reverently to the cross that crowned the church tower, then bowed his head, crossed himself, and as could be seen by the movement of his lips, repeated a prayer.

Then his glance came down to the doorway and the lights of the altar in the background, and again he bowed, crossed himself, and again offered a prayer, crossing his arms repeatedly over his breast as he did so. This was all by way of preliminary. After these acts of devotion, he yet again bowed his head, closed his eyes, and with crossed arms on

breast, stood for half an hour and more at a time, motionless as a statue, bareheaded in the blazing hot sun, with moving lips and with an expression on his face of the deepest reverence. Occasionally he removed his arms from their position on his breast and made the sign of the cross, but for the most part the only movement that could be detected was that of his lips. He seemed lost in thought and entirely oblivious to the life that was going on about him. The playfully mischievous boys, ready enough to ridicule or torment anything out of the ordinary in the way of human kind, passed him by in silence and respected his devotions. These lasted generally for an hour or thereabouts, and when he turned to depart there was an expression of rapt spiritual elevation upon his countenance that was good to see. Surely there could be no doubt on the part of the observer that, whether one believe in the efficacy of prayer or not, this poor cripple, seemingly with nothing in life left worth living for, found deep satisfaction in this silent worship.

Singularly enough, in all the time that this devout man came under my observation, I never saw him enter the church. He was always content to stand afar off, lift up his eyes to the cross, and pray. Throngs might be passing in and out of the sacred



The Cuatro Ciénegas Plaza in Winter ,

The Church

THE DEVOUT PRAYING CRIPPLE 31

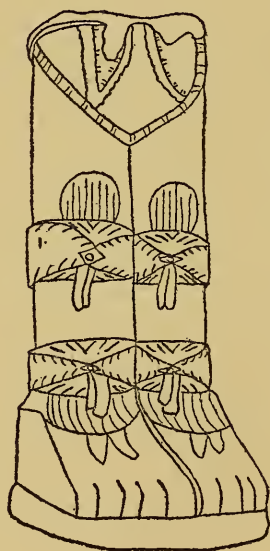
edifice, but he never joined them. Whether it was as a penance that he denied himself this privilege, I was never able to learn. But those of a devout disposition frequently impose such punishments upon themselves, and appear to take deep delight in inflicting spiritual as well as bodily pain upon their own minds and bodies.

But that the poor cripple found an inexpressible satisfaction in thus worshiping could plainly enough be seen.

By the way, speaking of church-going customs in Mexico, there is one very admirable practice, that might well find imitation elsewhere. The Mexican women do *not* go to church to show their finery (far be it from me to insinuate that there are any women of any nationality who actually do that), for the simple reason that they have no opportunity to make any such display. Whether it is a church rule or only a custom, I do not know, but I do know that all women attending church wear plain black, and nothing else. There is nothing to distinguish the rich from the poor, except the quality of the fabric. In cut, color and fashion there is no difference. In Mexican churches "the rich and the poor meet together—the Lord is the maker of them all."

32 SEEN IN A MEXICAN PLAZA

There is one day when the custom is not followed—on Easter Sunday, at the later services of the day. At the first service all attend in sober black. At the subsequent ones they wear all the seasonable colors and the sight is well worth seeing too.



Idyll Sixth

REGULAR PRIVATE BEGGARS ON REGULAR DAYS



IT is Wednesday or Saturday, as the case may be. If I have left my room early and taken up my usual station in the plaza under my favorite china-berry tree, then my "regular beggars" follow me thither. Never by any chance do they lose sight of me on the days designated. For be it known, in small towns like this as well as in some of the larger ones, there are "regular" beggars' days when mendicants are allowed to make application for alms, being not supposed or permitted to do so on the other days. And each person not himself a beggar has his regular private ones who call him their "patron" (with a long "o"). Only on Wednesdays and Saturdays are one's regular beggars expected to approach him, and woe betide the irregular ones whether they annoy him on regular or irregular days. They are not permitted to poach

upon the preserves of the regulars at any time, and some rather warm scraps have been witnessed when such attempts have been made. The favored beggars are very jealous of their privileges, and forcibly resent any attempt to deprive them thereof.

Of course, at the outset one makes his choice among the multitude of applicants, endeavoring to select the most deserving as may appear to him, and also in keeping with the reasonable possibilities of his pocket in this direction. In this case, early in my stay in Cuatro Cienegas, on the regular days a crowd of mendicants—about all there were in town, as I judged—flocked at my door, as I was not at that time posted upon the practice described. Foreigner and millionaire are synonymous in the native mind. Acting upon advice, I finally selected three whom I considered the most deserving. One was a cripple who had, besides having his legs mangled, lost his eyesight by a premature explosion of dynamite in a mine. His only possession was a violin, and this he was accustomed to play in front of the doors of his patrons, as a sort of notification of his presence, as well as of appreciation for their benevolence. It was impossible to look at this poor blind wreck of what had once been a stalwart miner without feeling the deepest sympathy for him.



Too Old to Work and so Becomes
a Beggar



A Little Mexican
Beauty



Bringing in a Load of
Herbs

Another of the select trio was a man who walked about on his hands and feet, wearing sandals on both and never straightening up. He afforded a weird enough spectacle, and in his case too it was impossible not to pity him. He was said to have been born deformed and never to have been able to stand upright, and so to have had to go through life in this ungainly and painful position.

The third of my private beggars was a poor, half-witted boy of twelve or thirteen. He could not speak a word. Uncouth noises like those of an animal were the only sounds he was capable of uttering. He was the butt of some of the cruel boys of the town, who used to torment him solely in order to see him in his speechless rage.

As soon as I had made my selections, the three favored ones saw to it that no others were permitted to apply, and a very rough, not to say painful, reception was given any who dared seek charity from me. But after a while it appeared that one case was not quite so deserving as it appeared on the surface. This was the man who walked on all fours. One day Don Martin saw me give him some money and after he had left, asked: "Why do you give that man money?"

"Why? Because he is a cripple and in misery."

"Yes, it is true he is a cripple and I do not wonder at your sympathy for him! But he has no need to beg. He is far better off than you. He has a fine ranch near Monclova, and several houses in that town, from which he receives very good rentals—enough to support himself and his wife in comfort. He only begs because he knows people pity him and will give him money without inquiry."

Further investigation showed that this was indeed the case, and he was cut off the free list promptly and decisively.

Said another friend one day upon seeing me give money to the blind man:

"Why do you give money to that man? Do you know what he does with it? He gets drunk."

I looked at the cripple—at his poor, sightless eyes, at his maimed legs, at his burned and scarred face, at his general appearance of misery, and then replied:

"Well, so would *I* get drunk if I were in his condition."

I found after a while that when I gave money to the half-witted boy other lads attacked him and took it away, he not being able to protect himself. So I arranged to always have some food in my room on the "regular beggar days," and when the

pitiful little chap appeared, always by sunrise on his regular days, I gave it to him and had him sit in the door under my care until it was consumed.

Later I learned that soon after I left the place, this little sufferer was taken by death—a happy ending for a life that had been nothing but misery to him. But I can still hear the inarticulate noises he was accustomed to make when he was tormented by the cruel boys. It was horrible—no less. True, those boys learned something about what an angry foreigner looked and talked like, and were careful to let the poor little chap alone when in my presence.



Idyll Seventh

“YOU MAY PAY ME WHATEVER YOU PLEASE”



O me one exceedingly hot day, while sitting in the shade of the china-berry, and while a number of others were seeking relief from the excessive heat under the neighboring trees, came a teamster, one Juan Treviño, every inch a gentleman, notwithstanding his humble calling. He had done much work for me, hauling goods to and from the railway station, a mile or more out of town, and we had become very well acquainted.

But first a few words of preface. It is a favorite practice of many who are engaged in performing public services for which perhaps there is no fixed charge, to reply, when asked what amount is due: “Whatever you wish to pay me.” This is more frequently the case when dealing with foreigners than with fellow-countrymen. The average foreigner will “stand” for an overcharge and is usually

willing to pay liberally for services that the native only rewards moderately—sufficiently, it is true. It is a favorite criticism among some Mexicans that the Americans have spoiled the help of the country by too liberal compensation, though this is as may be.

Thus, in Cuatro Cienegas the regular rate as established by law for carrying passengers between the town and the railway station was twenty cents—ten cents American currency. Naturally, but few foreigners were aware of this, and consequently, after landing at the hotel, when they asked the driver the amount of the fare, the usual reply was “Whatever you like, Señor.” Thereupon the passenger, nine times out of ten, would throw a half dollar to the driver and think he was getting off cheaply. Because of the known liberality of foreigners in such matters, the native always prefers to trust to that trait rather than to the legal charges.

So with Juan Treviño, teamster and gentleman. He had done much work for me, and as he always replied to my query as to the amount due, “Whatever you please, Señor,” by tacit understanding there was a sort of agreement that \$1.50 was a fair and reasonable rate of compensation for a single trip to or from the station with an ordinary load.

On the occasion referred to, a whim seized me and when he gave the customary reply—"Whatever you please, Señor"—I did not at once pay him, but said:

"Juan, just what do you mean by that? Do you really mean that you will be satisfied with *anything* I choose to give you?"

"Yes, sir. I mean just that. If you choose to give me one cent, or ten cents, or fifty cents, or one dollar, or two dollars, or five dollars, or ten dollars, it is all the same to me. I shall be perfectly satisfied with whatever you choose to give me."

Wishing to make a test, but entirely as a joke, I thereupon handed him one of the old-fashioned "cart-wheel" copper cents that used to circulate in Mexico as they once did in the United States, and which I was carrying as a souvenir.

He accepted it, did not look at all surprised or discomposed at being thus taken at his word, thanked me in his customarily polite manner and withdrew a little to one side. The spectators, mostly drivers like himself, gave a yell of derision and bestowed all sorts of mockery upon their companion. But he only smiled and never said a word. I waited a bit until the storm of ridicule had sub-



Aged Mexican Indian Types

sided and then called to him to come nearer, which he did, still with a smile on his face. Then I said:

“Juan, I was only joking. I did not mean that you should do that work for only one cent. Here is the usual price,” tendering him three silver half-dollars.

But he would have none of it. He refused most positively to accept the money and no amount of persuasion served to change his mind.

“Señor, I told you that I would be perfectly satisfied with anything you chose to give me—whether it was a cent, or ten cents, or half a dollar, or one dollar, or two dollars, or five dollars, or ten dollars. You chose to give me one cent. I have taken it. I am perfectly satisfied. You do not owe me anything. I do not want any more money. I am a man of my word!”

Nor could he be persuaded to accept the money and I was forced to actually put it in his vest pocket against his will, and to insist upon his understanding that I had no intention to defraud him of his just dues; that it was all a joke, and I wanted him as a personal favor to take the money.

A little bootblack gave me an amusing experience in the same direction. He came to my settee one Sunday morning and I told him to black my shoes.


I had seen him doing the same thing for some shoe-wearing peones on a neighboring seat and accepting from them the regular tariff of two cents. He knew, too, that I had seen the transaction and the passage of the money. So when he had completed the task I asked him the usual question—"How much do I owe you?"

He hesitated, looked earnestly into my face, while an expression of indecision passed over his countenance. He was afraid to demand more than he had asked of the peones, under the law he could not, yet he decidedly wanted a better price from "El Gringo" and was puzzled how to go about it. Finally, after quite a period of hesitation, he desperately blurted out: "Whatever you please, Señor." He was rewarded with the price that I had always been accustomed to pay—ten cents Mex.

But I shall never forget how the little chap studied my face while making up his mind, nor the expression of happiness when he found that he had "taken a chance" and not been disappointed. I tried my best to keep my face stern and sober while waiting for his decision, but I fancy he must have seen a sort of friendly twinkle of amusement in my eyes, for he at length took the plunge and announced his momentous determination.

Idyll Eighth

NOVEL METHOD OF HANDLING MEAT

 ONE of the oddest sights, perhaps, could be seen on the plaza early in the morning before school "takes in." Boys are sent to the butcher shops for the daily supply of meat—such places being designated by no other sign than a red flag displayed on a bamboo pole over the doorway of the establishment. Which led to a specimen of the genus "turista" remarking, upon looking down a populous street and seeing a half-dozen of these blood red banners fluttering in the breeze: "Why, they must have a lot of scarlet fever here. Look at the quarantine flags! Let us get out of here as quickly as possible." And they went!

Instead of wrapping the purchase in paper, as in this country, a bit of string or maguey fiber is tied around it, long enough to permit of a loop in the free end, which is passed around the purchaser's wrist, and he starts for home.

Just imagine a bunch of American boys thus equipped! The result need scarcely be hinted at. One boy takes a "swipe" at another with his beefsteak, or veal cutlet, or slice of liver, or pork or mutton chop. The other boy quite naturally responds in kind. The friends of both come to the support of their champions, and a real nice, interesting little fracas follows, which only serves to bloody the noses and faces of the combatants, to muss them up generally, but does not injure the meat in the least—perhaps makes it a bit more tender! It is indeed a sight worth seeing!

But not always do the boys fight with the meat. They all have pockets full of marbles, and one challenges another to a game "for keeps." The challenge is accepted. Half a dozen boys join in the game. They lay their steaks and chops and cutlets and roasts down on the grass, or if there is none, then on the ground—small care have they as to the place of deposit! Then to play most earnestly, oblivious of the fact that breakfast may be waiting the prompt delivery of the meat. The ever present dog is on hand, of course, in greater or lesser numbers, and they eye the toothsome morsels so carelessly lying there on the ground.

The boys become so absorbed in their game that

they are entirely careless of their canine companions, pay no attention to them, and soon one makes a rush, grabs one of the chops or steaks or cutlets, as the case may be, and dashes madly for a place of safety, followed by the entire band of four-footed companions. And then a battle royal is waged for a mouthful of the stolen dainty.

And then, when the game is finished and an account of stock is taken, the chopless or steakless boy goes crying homeward—though why he should cry I do not know, for never once in ten years of life and travel in Mexico did I see a child punished with violence by a parent. It is only in more highly civilized (?) countries that angry parents beat and thrash and maul their children for some youthful offense of carelessness or heedlessness—in Mexico never!

Barbarous Mexico? ?



Idyll Ninth

LITTLE JUAN JOSE WONG AND HIS SISTER "LUPE"



IT is midday. "High noon by the old town clock." In this case, the church clock. School, which has been in session since eight o'clock in the morning, is "out." (How would American children like to be kept at their studies four long hours on a stretch? This in the forenoon and another long three hours in the afternoon?) Up the main street and across the plaza comes a stream of youth of both sexes, home-and-dinner bound—for dinner is a midday meal in Mexico. It is an interesting sight—as children always are. Mexican children are just like others too—strangely enough, considering the fact that many Americans and other foreigners seem inclined to doubt their possession of the same sort of feelings and the same sort of capabilities as their own.

These children play "tag," and "peg top," and "duck on the rock" (the most ancient child's game in the world), and "marbles," and "hide and seek," and other games dear to the childish heart in every country under the sun. They fly kites and enjoy all the sports known to childhood the world around. And they play bullfight, too! And right lively times they have of it! One boy is "it," and the others take off their coats and flaunt them in his face, just as if they were the red capes of the real bullfighters. And the boy who is "it" charges and bellows and paws the ground and throws dust in the air, like a sure-enough bull, and occasionally makes a swift dash at one of his supposed tormentors and rolls him in the dust, to the great merriment of the other participants and of the onlookers as well.

Most of the kiddies soon become acquainted with "El Gringo," and have a pleasant smile and greeting for him. Especial favorites, however, are little rolypoly black-eyed Juan Jose Wong and his dear little sister "Lupe," that being the two-syllabled diminutive for Guadalupe, a favorite name in this country for men as well as women, taken from the much revered patron saint of Mexico, the Virgin of Guadalupe. As may perhaps be imagined from the names, these children are the offspring of a

Chinese father and a Mexican mother—and it is notable how women of the better peon class are so willing to take a Chinese husband. There are any number of such unions all over the country, and it is a marked peculiarity that the women are almost invariably the best looking of their class.

And the children! They are pretty, attractive in person and manner, bright and intelligent. Down at Monclova, the big railroad town forty miles away, is a school entirely devoted to the education of the children of such couples, and the teachers have assured me that no equal number of pupils in this country, or any other for that matter, could surpass these for quickness of apprehension or ability to learn with rapidity. Few indeed could equal them.

Little Juan Jose's father and mother are good friends of mine and when he and his sister pass from school they always stop and we have a little chat. Juan Jose proudly shows his books and the slate upon which is his daily task, evincing great satisfaction thereat! Their books are looked over, and perhaps some candy or nuts pass more or less surreptitiously from "El Gringo" to his little friends. Who knows? Anyhow, the little ones soon shake hands in farewell (even the smallest


children are taught to salute their elders thus both on meeting and separating), and they pass on homeward, halting and turning to give a friendly hand wave and another smile to the lonely foreigner.



Idyll Tenth

THE CRIMEAN WAR AND THE MEXICAN PLAZA

"Half a league, half a league, half a league onward,
Into the jaws of death, into the mouth of hell,
Rode the Six Hundred!"

 **W**HO among us who was a school-boy fifty years and more ago, is there who did not on a Friday afternoon, when the hated and much dreaded hour for "speaking pieces" came around, recite "The Charge of the Light Brigade?" How we rolled it out! What a pleasure it was to be able to utter in public and under the cold official eye a word which, when used privately and in strictly personal matters and discussions, brought condign punishment if overheard by our elders or those in authority. How we did love to be able to talk from the platform about people going to hell, while if we did the same kind of talking, only *not* in poetical fashion, on the playground, we were

so sure to catch something of the same kind! Why, it was almost as good as being a minister and being able to talk about hell-fire and damnation right out in public!

We began our youthful "piece speaking" with:

"You'd scarce expect one of my age
To speak in public on the stage,"

Or:

"Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are."

Or with:

"How big was Alexander, pa,
That people called him great?"

From that we progressed to:

"The breaking waves dashed high
On a stern and rock-bound coast."

Then came:

"The boy stood on the burning deck
Whence all but he had fled."

And lost his life because he had not good plain common sense enough to know that his father must surely have perished and would have wished him to leave the burning vessel with the others. In duty bound of course we had to publicly admire the devotion of the lad in waiting for orders from his dead parent, and incidentally waiting to be blown to smithereens when all had sought safety elsewhere.

Away down in our own hearts we thought he was a bit of a prig and we could not see anything very noble in throwing one's life away in that manner. Far better to have gone with the others and lived to fight another day. It seemed to us that that would have been the better way to have rendered service to one's country. Anyhow, we did not believe the story. There never was such a boy! There couldn't be—except in Sunday School books!

A great favorite too was "Excelsior!" How the teacher did struggle with us while we singsonged our way through:

"The shades of night were falling fast
As through an Alpine village passed," etc.

And tried to make us give the proper emphasis to each "Excelsior" at the end of a stanza.

Then too there was the famous "Marco Bozzaris" of the Greek revolution and its ringing:

"Strike till the last armed foe expires!
Strike for your altars and your fires!
Strike for the green graves of your sires,
God and your native land!"

My, how we did love to bring out those last four lines! How we did shout them and thrash the air with our arms and our imaginary swords, and

waste no pity on the Turk who at midnight slept in his guarded tent and never dreamed what we were doing to him!

Then came the Civil War and its accompanying flood of martial "poetry" and otherwise. We told on the school platform all about the fight between the Monitor and the Merrimac. We told how:

"At anchor in Hampton Roads we lay
On board of the *Cumberland* sloop of war."

And how:

"Then like a kraken, huge and black,
She crushed our ribs in her iron grasp."

We hadn't the faintest idea what a "kraken" was, but it was a fine sounding word and we could make the little ones fairly goggle-eyed with our fierceness.

And then came dear old Barbara Frietchie! We had it early and we had it bad in our little old New Jersey school! And to this day, considerably more than fifty years later, I can recite every word of it, from

"Up from the meadows rich with corn,
Clear in the cool September morn,"

Clear down to:

"And ever the stars above look down
On thy stars below at Frederick Town."

But what has all this to do with the shady reserved seat of "El Gringo" under the china-berry tree in a far-off and lonely Mexican village?

It is a far cry from the bloody battle fields of Sebastopol and Inkermann and Balaklava and Alma to quiet, peaceful little Cuatro Cienegas. It is a long distance chronologically from the stirring events of the Crimean war in the early fifties down to the tenth year of the twentieth century! Three score years have passed and what possible connection can there be?

We shall see!

I am sitting in my favorite shaded nook, my friend and instructor in things Mexican (Don Martin) by my side. We are idly watching the people passing in and out of the hotel on the corner half a block away. A stranger (to me) emerges and comes toward us. He is a spare, upstanding man, with snow white hair and mustache, face finely wrinkled and tanned by the desert sun till it is a deep umber, but withal he strikes out briskly despite the heat and carries himself like a soldier—which indeed he is, or rather was.

As he approaches, Don Martin says: "Here comes a man whom you have often told me you would like to meet. He lives in Ocampo, away out

on the desert, and he is the owner of those decorations which are in my safe and which I showed you when you first came here. I will introduce you."

We arise as he comes nearer and the introduction is given. I shake hands with the stranger.

He is Alphonse Martellet, Sergeant of the fifth battalion of the Forty-third regiment of the line, veteran of the Crimean war, veteran under Marshal Bazaine during the French invasion of Mexico, proud owner of the Victoria Cross and the decoration of the Legion of Honor. And withal as quiet and unassuming a man as one could ever meet. Born in San Lorenzo, on the Gran Riviere, in the province of Jura, he entered the army early in life and did not leave it until the end of the French occupation of this country.

Greetings having been exchanged, we sit down and Sergeant Martellet tells us about the Crimean war. He was in all the bloody engagements of the campaign. He saw the charge of the Light Brigade. He was with a battery on one of the hills commanding the valley down which the gallant Six Hundred rode to their death, and he shakes his head as he tells of the rashness, the needlessness, the folly of it all—all the result of a misunderstanding between two officers who were too proud to waste time in

explanation. It is ancient history, but how interesting and thrilling from an eye-witness!

Finally I turn the conversation to the two notable decorations.

"Sergeant," I say, with more or less diffidence, "Don Martin has shown me the decorations belonging to you which he has in safekeeping. Will you pardon me if I ask you to tell us why they were given you? It surely must have been for some act of bravery much out of the ordinary. Will you not tell us the story?"

The Sergeant gave me a lightning glance. He drew himself up, clicked his heels together, saluted, and said:

"They were given me for doing my duty, sir!"

And no amount of persuasion could prevail upon him to give the slightest hint whatever of what must have been some extraordinarily gallant act.

As has been said, Sergeant Martellet was in Bazaine's army and his term of service expired before Napoleon III withdrew his troops, after having received a gentle hint from the Washington Government that their continuous presence on American soil was not regarded with favor by the United States. Martellet had seen so much of the country that he had become enamored of it—or

rather of one of its fair daughters, for his wife, a Mexican, must have been a very handsome woman in her younger days, as one can see readily enough. So he remained, and settled down in the little village of Ocampo, away out in the desert, and lived there many, many years. When I met him he was 93 years of age, but was as active as many a man 30 or 40 years his junior. I begged him for a photograph, but he had never had one taken, and as there was no photographer in town and my own camera was out of commission, I was obliged to be disappointed.

But we drank a copita together of the best French brandy to be obtained, I told him it was one of the greatest honors I had ever enjoyed, and with a warm grasp of the hand, another military salute and a few words of compliment, he went off down the street en route to his desert home.

But think of it! From Balaklava to Cuatro Cienegas! From 1854 in the Crimea to 1910 on the Coahuila desert!

Idyll Eleventh

THE CAPTURED BOY WHO FOUND HIS WAY HOME



GAIN I am occupying my favorite seat under the dense and grateful foliage of the china-berry tree. And, by the way, never was there a tree so fitted for tropical climates. Never was there a tree which gave such complete shelter from the heat of the torrid sun. Not a ray of burning sunlight can penetrate beneath it. The limbs hang well down toward the ground in graceful curves, while the mass of verdure overhead is so dense that even the blue sky is shut off from view. By all means if one be seeking grace of appearance, beauty of outline and every shade giving quality, he should plant a china-berry on lawn or in garden.

As was so frequently the case, Don Martin was by my side and we were engaged in our favorite occupation — exchanging information regarding each other's countries. Both were anxious learners.

Glancing down the walk at an approaching figure, Don Martin said:

“Here is an interesting character. This man who is coming has been a soldier most of his life, but when he was a small boy of eight, in the days when the Comanches and Apaches were accustomed to raid this region from the north, he had an experience of the most remarkable character. Here—I will ask him to tell you himself about it.”

He was invited to a seat and Don Martin told him that “El Gringo” would like to hear the story of his capture by the Indians and his remarkable escape from them. This man was different from Sergeant Martellet. He had never had the education nor the advantages of the associations that the Frenchman had enjoyed and his memory was not nearly so keen. Jose Martinez was his name. He was over eighty, but did not carry his years well by comparison with the hero of the Crimean war. However, his military life had kept him from falling into early decrepitude and he was still as hale and hearty as could reasonably be expected at his time of life.

This is the story he told us, sitting there in the cool, refreshing shade of the china-berry tree.

“It all happened many, many years ago. I was

born in this town. It is my tierra—my home. When I was eight years old, my parents, who were poor, put me on a horse and sent me to herd the animals of the other people out in the valley every day in order that they might have enough to eat. Every morning at sunrise I went from house to house on my horse and collected the cows and horses and burros and goats and sheep, and drove them out into the valley where there was grass and water. I carried some tortillas in my pocket and I stayed out there alone all day, bringing the animals back at night. When we reached the edge of the town they all went home of their own accord. I did not have to bother with them, as each knew its owner's place, while I went home to my parents.

“The favorite pasture ground was on the trail toward the Sierra Mojada pass and near the Ojo de Agua (literally the eye of water—a large spring two or three miles out). This spring, as you know, is around the other side of the point of the mountain of Ante-Ojo (the spectacles). It is out of sight of Cuatro Cienegas and is a very lonely place indeed. Frequently I passed days at a time there without seeing a single person. Of course I knew that the Indians from the desert sometimes made raids and stole cattle and horses, and killed people,

but I knew that if anything happened to me it would be as God willed, so I was not afraid.

“One day I shall never forget. I had eaten my dinner and sat down in the shade of a tree near the Ojo de Agua and had fallen asleep. I woke suddenly and saw I was surrounded by a party of Comanche Indians, some armed with bows and arrows and some with guns, and all looking very fierce and angry. Some of them wanted to kill me, but the Chief interfered and said no—that I should go with them and be an Indian. So they rounded up the cattle and horses—they did not want the goats and sheep, though they killed some of them and carried the meat with them. They put me on my horse, and tied my hands behind me with some rawhide thongs. They also fastened a thick cloth over my face so that I could not see which way we went or the trails we followed. An Indian took the reata of my horse in his hand to lead it, and then we started, driving the stock of the Cuatro Cienegas people before us.

“We traveled till dark, and then went into a rocky canyon and made camp. It was pitch dark and they took the cloth from my face, but did not untie my hands except when they gave me something to eat, and then they tied them again quickly.

All that I could see was that we were in a very wild and rocky canyon. Before daylight in the morning they blindfolded me again, put me on my horse with my hands tied, and we traveled again all day. It was very tiresome and I tried to think of some way to escape. Every night I tried to think of a plan, but they watched me too closely and there was never any chance, as they kept a guard awake all the time, for fear we might be followed.

"We traveled this way for four days, going many, many leagues, and I began to think I would never see my home and my family again. I did not let the Indians see me cry, but at night I could not help crying very much.

"On the night of the fourth day we camped in a very mountainous place and by this time I was feeling so sad that I did not care whether the Indians killed me or not. I was determined to get away if I could. The Indians were very tired and they were now so far from Cuatro Cienegas that they were no longer afraid of pursuit, so they set no guard that night as they had done before.

"They all laid down and soon all were asleep. But I could not sleep. I was too sad. After awhile I saw that all were sound asleep, so I got up very quietly from where I was lying between two of

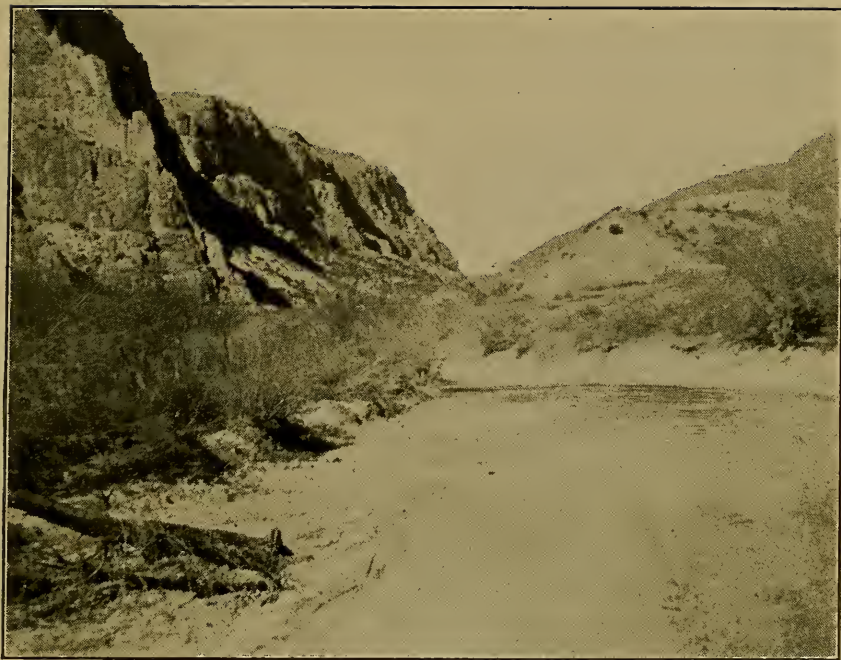
them. If any one woke I was going to tell them I wanted a drink of water. I went very slowly and cautiously to the spring of water that made this a camping place. My hands were tied behind me with some rawhide thongs, but I knew very well how to loosen them by wetting them. So I sat down with my back to the water and reached down into it until the thongs were covered with it. Soon they began to get soft and then I stretched and stretched them until at last they came off and my hands were free, but they were very sore and tired.

"I put the thongs in my pocket so that the Indians could not find them and know that I was free, and then I went away from the camp farther up into the rugged gulch, as I knew when the Indians left they would go the other way to the mouth of the canyon. I stepped and jumped from rock to rock, and did not walk in the sand or on the ground, so as not to leave any trail for the Indians to follow. At last I found a little cave or crevice under some rocks and in such a lonely and hidden place that I did not believe they could find me. I crawled into it and arranged some loose rocks in front, and then I laid down and went to sleep, after praying to the Virgin of Guadalupe to protect me, as my mother had taught me to do. When I woke it was

broad daylight and I could hear the Comanches hunting for me and calling to each other. You may be sure I kept very quiet and did not move. But they did not find me, and at last they started away with their stolen cattle and horses.

"I stayed in the cave a long time, for fear some one had remained behind to watch for me, but after waiting several hours I crawled out and looked around. I did not know where I was. I had never been in that country so far from my home, away out on the desert, and knew nothing about it. But I took a long drink at the spring and ate a little jerky (dried meat) that I had hidden in my shirt and which I had stolen from the Indians' supply the night before when my hands were untied to let me eat.

"I did not know which way to go in order to get back to my home, though I had tried my best all the time the Indians had me to remember or to see in what direction we were traveling. I sat down and thought what was the best thing to do. Then I remembered that while traveling, all the morning the sun used to shine directly on my back and that all the afternoon it shone straight into my face. This I could tell even though I was blindfolded. So I concluded that if I changed this about, and traveled



Road up the Canyon from Cuatro Ciénegas to the Desert ^



Starting for the Desert

in the morning with the sun in my face and in the afternoon kept it on my back, I would surely come to Cuatro Cienegas after awhile. So I did this. I traveled almost as fast on foot as the Indians had on horseback, because they had to drive the stolen cattle and horses before them and could not go very fast.

"I found some tunas (nopal cactus fruit), which I ate and the jerky I stole from the Indians lasted me a long time. I knew the desert water signs too, my father having taught me, and so I got along very well, though sometimes I was very thirsty, as the water is very far apart.


"But I was so glad to get away from the Indians that I did not mind that. At last, on the afternoon of the fifth day after I got away from the Indians, I came in sight of the Cuatro Cienegas valley through the Sierra Mojada pass, and recognized it. In a few hours more (it was after sunset) I walked into my parents' house. My mother was very much frightened and thought I was a ghost, for they all believed the Indians had killed me. They all thought it was a very wonderful thing that I had done, but I could not see it. It was the only thing to do if I ever expected to see my family again. After that they always sent a

man with a gun to guard the herd while pasturing, and did not let a boy go alone. But I would never have escaped from the Indians and got safely back to my home if I had not remembered about the sun.

“Yes, I was only eight years old, but I had always remembered what my father taught me.”

Idyll Twelfth

LEISURELY MANNER OF TRANSACTING BUSINESS

 MY friend, Don Martin, as has been stated, was the local manager of a branch bank. This, as is customary in Mexico, was located in a portion of the same building occupied as his family residence, and was just across the street from one corner of the plaza. It was necessary for me to transact considerable business of a financial nature with him. The bank was in a large room, with a space at the entrance separated by a half-height partition from the part devoted to the safes, desks, etc. Don Martin's son Carlos was the cashier.

The door through the partition had a sort of combination catch that could only be operated by those who had been initiated into its use, but very early in my acquaintance I was given the "open sesame" and passed in and out as I desired without ceremony.

The method of transacting business here, as in many other portions of the Republic, was so novel and so at variance with American customs, that it is worth noting. Here is the manner in which I was accustomed to cash a draft or to send one away:

I entered the place, opened the door into the rear and passed through it. Usually four or five and sometimes more gentlemen would be there, all sitting down and talking with Don Martin, and all having business to transact in due time. Immediately upon my entrance they all arose and we shook hands and exchanged the usual daily greetings. Then, if there was no extra chair for me, a mozo would be sent to an adjoining room for one, and not infrequently one of the standing gentlemen would hand me his and they would all insist upon my sitting down, the others remaining standing until the needed extra chair was brought. None would seat himself until such time as chairs were provided for all.

Then we would chat for awhile on various subjects, and finally Don Martin would ask what he could do for me. I would explain, and he would instruct his son to comply with my wishes. This would be done in full leisurely fashion, and after



Peon Family at Home



Upper Class Family Group in Patio of Residence

the completion of the transaction I would remain awhile longer. Finally I would arise, and immediately all the others also arose, and I passed from one to the other, shaking hands with each in turn and wishing him a pleasant day. Not one would resume his seat until after I had left. After bidding them all adieu individually I turned at the door and bade them farewell collectively, after which I went on my way. I had consumed perhaps half an hour, perhaps longer, in an operation that in the United States might have required one minute, possibly two or three.

But why not? That is the custom of the country—at least in the more remote districts. There is no hurried rushing into a bank, slapping a piece of paper on the counter, standing or dancing impatiently while the cashier or teller spends half a minute or a minute in verifying the signature, grabbing the money and rushing out at top speed. No! Why not imitate the Mexican custom to some extent at least? Take your time! You will get just as much business done in this fashion in the long run as if you rushed and hurried and made yourself and every one else uncomfortable by your conduct. And incidentally you will get a vastly greater amount of satisfaction and comfort out of life.

When a man is seen rushing and hurrying along the street in many Mexican towns, one can hear the subdued expression among the disgusted onlookers, "There goes another tonto (crazy) American!" And who shall say this expression is not too often deserved? For the very man who does so much hurrying and rushing will loaf by the half hour after he has got over his hurry.



Idyll Thirteenth

GENEROSITY A NATIONAL TRAIT



UT in the open it is hot—burning, sizzling, scorching hot! There is no equivocation about it. It is hot as—well, as a furnace! The thermometer is well above the hundred mark and the rays of the sun scorch and burn as they can and do only in a region for the most part desert in character. But while the heat is intense—you can cook eggs in the sand if you will—and it is positive cruelty to animals to force your saddle horse to wade through it at midday—its effects upon the human sensibilities do not compare in any manner as to bodily discomfort, mental distress or even danger, with what is too often the case in supposedly more favored regions. The atmosphere is so dry, so nearly without appreciable moisture, that the deleterious effects of extreme heat are far less than are experienced in a temperature of twenty

degrees less but in a location nearer large bodies of water or with more vegetation.

Away from the direct rays of the sun—as for example in the grateful shade of the china-berry tree which was “El Gringo’s” favorite point of observation—it is by comparison cool and comfortable. Not a single ardent ray from the super-ardent sun penetrates the dense shadows. A gentle breeze stirs the vegetation of tree, shrub and plant, and brings the grateful fragrance of the plaza flowers to the nostrils. It serves also to keep cool the body, clad in as few and as flimsy garments as is consistent with the ordinary observances of tropical society—no, not a society that is tropical, but a society of the tropics! The streets are deserted by man and beast—or at least all those to the manner born. Perchance some stranger—some “tonto”—may be seen venturing into the blaze of the mid-afternoon sun, but those who are wise remain under shelter, either of house, tree or vine.

It is almost mid-afternoon. The sun is well below the meridian. School “takes in” at three o’clock, and from various directions come the little ones thither bound. It is near the close of the siesta hour, and the children have the streets practically to themselves. From every point come the

boys and the girls—there is but one educational institution in the town, though a spacious one, surrounded by experimental gardens where the young ideas are taught how to dig as well as to shoot. They keep closely in the shade of house and tree, and take advantage of every shred of protection from the sun's still oppressive rays. They are in no hurry. Nothing short of a wild animal could persuade them to move faster than at the proverbial snail's pace—as will be shown in another pleasing little experience that once befell the gatherers in the plaza.

Here too, wise in the devices of his occupation, comes the ice cream peddler. Well he knows who are his best customers, and he establishes himself and his cart-supported freezer of delicious coolness in the dense shade of a cluster of great trees at a point of juncture where troops of children from three different thoroughfares converge. Well he knows how tempting are his evanescent and to tell the truth somewhat doubtful wares (as regards cleanliness and component parts) in the tropic, torrid heat of a tropical and torrid mid-afternoon. And well he knows how to charm the ultimate centavo from the ultimate pocket of the ultimate kidlet, be it male or female.

It is interesting to watch the affair. Here comes a little ten-year-old girl—pretty as a picture; a great deal prettier than some pictures—with a bevy of dear friends—pretty ones—very dear ones, as it proves—dear indeed! They have learned in some manner, more or less occult, with the occultism of childhood, that their fortunate companion has become possessed in some way (how they care not) of the large sum of five or ten centavos. The little capitalist—just like a grown-up one—has in consequence a superabundance of friends, though in this case it is not fair to fancy that it is only the possession of comparative wealth that causes the less fortunate ones to group themselves around her and accompany her schoolward—also ice-cream-ward!

Straight to the ice cream peddler march the little squad of feminine humanity. The youthful leader makes known her desires, which strangely enough appear to be in exact accord with the desires of her companions—if eyes can express desire. The dealer ladles out a generous portion—a heaping saucerful of frosty, tempting, appetizing sweetness. The little ones form a circle about the capitalist, the light of expectancy in their eyes, and looking for all the world like a nest full of birdlings waiting with open mouths the food that they know will be sup-

plied by their parents. The capitalistic investor in frozen delightfulness proceeds straightway to apportion the delicious morsels—a spoonful at a time. The first spoonfuls are generous and heaping. Then by reason of the rapid diminution of the parent supply they become smaller and smaller. The generous-minded little distributor glances at the remaining open-mouthed ones, gauges the amount of ice cream that is left, and manages to make it go around, just go around, leaving no one unsupplied except her own dear little self! Alas and alack, when her own turn comes the plate is empty—as empty as that of the fabled Jack Spratt and his wife. The last melted drop has disappeared into the mouths of her associates, and she has had never a taste! ! Just the proverbial smell is all that falls to her lot!

Her smile is brave, though perhaps a bit rueful! There is really nothing to be said. The rest of the party, like herself, are “stone broke.” So the little bankrupt capitalist returns the saucer and spoon to the peddler and trudges sturdily off toward the school, not indicating by any visible act that she felt disappointment or regret at having been so ultra-generous. Her enjoyment at witnessing the enjoyment of her little playmates was apparently as

great as it would have been had she devoured the entire dish of ice cream herself without outside assistance.

So too with the boys as well as the girls. Many a time, sitting at one side and out of observation, I have seen the little kiddies gather about one of their number who was the possessor of some candy, cake, fruit, or other delectable morsel. Many a time have I seen the possessor break off pieces and pass them around until the whole had been given away and he or she had not a morsel for themselves.

It is in truth a pretty sight—a testimonial of the most convincing character as to the innate unselfishness of the people. And many a time I have said to myself: “I wonder how long I would have to wait before I saw children of any other nationality give such spontaneous exhibitions of generosity and unselfishness.” I wonder! Or rather, I do not!

And this beautiful trait is not confined to the children, by any means. Grown-ups are just as generous, not only with luxuries but with necessities as well.

They will divide their last morsel of food with some one who is hungry. While food was scarce in Mexico City I saw a small roll handed to a peon who was eyeing a basket full of bread with the ex-

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pression of a starving animal. He took it hastily, started to put it to his mouth, then turned to another peon equally hungry looking and said: "Here—you are hungrier than I," at the same time giving him three-fourths of the morsel, and retaining only a mouthful for himself! A family may be seated at a meal which is scanty enough for them, but if a hungry person chances by, even though he be a total stranger, he will be invited in the heartiest manner to share in the food.

If there is any one thing that Mexicans are not, it is in being greedy where food or delicacies are concerned.



Idyll Fourteenth

AN OPEN-AIR MOVIE EXHIBITION



IF the writer who pre-empted the title "Far From the Madding Crowd" could have known Cuatro Cienegas as "El Gringo" came to know it, both from his own especial settee in the shade of the china-berry tree in the plaza, as well as from his wanderings about the town and its outskirts, he would have conceded beyond the peradventure of a doubt that no spot in his own country, no matter how secluded or how remote, could for one moment excel it or even compare with it in loneliness or in the absence of anything that savored of the presence of a crowd, whether madding or not.

The pretty little hamlet lay off the beaten path of traveler or tourist. Few ever came thither except on business bent, and when that was transacted, departure was quickly taken. On occasion the solitary daily train arriving about midday discharged an infrequent foreigner. "El Gringo's" coign of vantage was so situated that none could enter the

town without passing under his more or less eagle eye, and if a single one managed in a year and a half to escape the welcoming hand and voice of his fellow-countryman or fellow-foreigner, as the case might be, as quickly as he entered the hotel, no record was kept of such untoward event. There were none! At the first glimpse of a foreign face, "El Gringo" hastened across to the hostelry and welcomed and was welcomed by the visitor. Many a pleasing acquaintance was made in this manner, and the assistance and information afforded the newcomer amply compensated the pleasure of meeting a compatriot.

The annual "fiesta" was the only event that drew any number of strangers Cienegas-ward, and its brief week ended, the place lapsed again into its usual somnolence.

Of a truth, it was a good place for one to rest and think—or perhaps merely to think that he was thinking! A good place to let one's mind lie fallow; to let the old crop of thoughts and fancies die out completely, or be turned under, buried and put out of sight, to fertilize and give place to a fresher, newer growth that eventuated mayhap in a fresher, newer, better harvest. As the Hebrews of old were commanded, and with good reason, to permit their

lands to remain uncultivated one year in seven, to lie fallow and rest, why should not human kind give themselves surcease from toil, if not as often as did the ancients with their lands, at least at proper intervals? Surely, if mere earth profits by such a rest, the human mind and body should reap equal benefit therefrom?

But while Cienegas was quiet and sleepy, innocent of excitement as a rule, still there were times when a ripple of novelty and interest swept over the community (as related elsewhere for example), and such an occasion was afforded by the advent of the first moving picture that had ever come to the community—absolutely the first! It is difficult in these days of such displays, when every hamlet in the land has its “movie theater,” to imagine such an unusual event, and still more difficult to realize the intense interest and surprise manifested by those who had never seen anything of the kind in all their lives, long or short as the case might be. Some, it is true, had witnessed such exhibitions in their infrequent visits to Monterrey, the metropolis of this section, or who had ventured accross the border and as far as San Antonio, the pleasure-affording Mecca of holiday makers from Mexico, and had found it difficult to convince their skeptical

AN OPEN-AIR MOVIE EXHIBITION 81

friends that they were indeed telling the truth about the marvels of the picture world, even if they did not repeat the experience of the staid and trustworthy attorney whose home was in a remote town in the State of Durango, and who completely destroyed his reputation for veracity by a recital of but a tithe of the wonders that he had witnessed in a memorable visit to Coney Island! Some had read about the latter-day wonders of the photographer's art of the twentieth century, but to many they were as strange and unknown as the nebular hypothesis or the depths of the milky way.

Came then a "cienematografia" to far-away Cuatro Cienegas, meagerly equipped, it is true, with films ancient even then, and so damaged by poor manufacture, much travel and rough handling, as to be almost undecipherable. Came the impresario and sought eagerly for some building or hall suitable for the presentation of the novelty and for the accommodation of the crowd that he felt sure would throng to inspect the views. But no such place was to be had. Diligent search throughout the entire town failed to disclose a room that would in any way answer the desired purpose.

The weather being pleasant (as was the rule where rain nor snow nor hail falls for months on

months in succession), the perplexed manager finally decided to make use of the only possible method for presenting his attraction, and that was in the corral at the rear of the hotel—a spacious area, surrounded by high adobe walls on three sides and the hotel on the other, from which doors opened directly. At one side were the sheds for the accommodation of vehicles and animals that preferred shelter to the open air, while on the other side were the flush walls of the hostelry. One corner was selected as the “theater,” or auditorium, and ropes were stretched from stakes driven to support them in order to rail off the audience from the four-footed occupants of the corral. A canvas sheet was spread as a roof, which formed the only shelter for the onlookers. An inner line of ropes separated the lowest priced portion of the audience from the higher priced one, this being the only distinction. All enjoyed equal advantages for viewing the pictures. There were no seats, no chairs, nothing for the accommodation of the audience in this respect. All were as a matter of fact on an equal footing—master and peon. Those who desired brought chairs or boxes or what not upon which to sit, but for the most part the audience stood upon an exact equality.

It was an odd sight. A few dim lanterns and candles afforded all the illumination needed. The gentle domestic animals, made curious by the unwonted invasion of their quarters, gathered on the outskirts of the audience and actually appeared to take an active interest in the unwonted display. They preserved their equanimity to fully as great a degree as the humans who had never before witnessed such a spectacle, and were grave and decorous auditors as became the occasion. Ejaculations of surprise and delight were heard from every side and the audience gave every evidence of deep enjoyment.

Altogether it was as remarkable a spectacle of its kind as "El Gringo" had ever witnessed, and quite as much interest was aroused by the surroundings and the demeanor of a large portion of the audience as by the pictures themselves.

Since then Cienegas has been provided with a theater equal to the requirements of a larger town, but the "movie" display in the corral of the hotel, with its audience of animals in the background, has always been one of the favorite recollections of "El Gringo" in this country of unusual sights and sounds and unusual experiences.

Idyll Fifteenth

A LATE AFTERNOON PANIC IN THE PLAZA



It is late in the afternoon.

The sun is nearing the serrated ridge that cuts off the Cuatro Cienegas valley from the vast desert-stretches to the west. The air is becoming cooler every moment, as the evening shadows commence to fall. These shadows come early too—long before the time appointed by the calendar for this latitude has been reached for the disappearance below the horizon of the great orb of day. The mountains that guard the town on the west are so lofty that the sun is hidden from sight long before the usual time in less well protected localities. The shadows are creeping slowly down the foothills, bringing out the light and shade of canyon and ridge, of shrub and grass, of the vari-colored rocks in a manner that one never tires of watching and studying.

The siesta hour has long since joined the majority. "El Gringo" is in his favorite loafing spot on the settee in the shade of the china-berry tree, watching and studying the constantly shifting scenes about him. The streets are alive with the populace. All the seats in the plaza are occupied and the hum of life is heard in every direction. Children throng the little park, play about the benches, listen to the blind violin player, buy sweetmeats from the peddlers—bits of candied cactus and squash and such like national delicacies—and enjoy themselves in the same manner as do their kin all over the world. Everything is peaceful, quiet and calm. An air of inexpressible security and enjoyment is over all.

Away up the street down which the guayule teams are wont to come as they near the end of their long and weary journey of a hundred miles from the heart of the desert, appears a cloud of dust. It rolls skyward as only dust can roll which has been pulverized to an almost impalpable powder by continued drought and thrown to the winds by the slightest disturbance of wheel, hoof or human foot. The cloud is so dense and hangs so closely to the ground, as well as towering aloft into the air, that for a long time and until it is well within the town

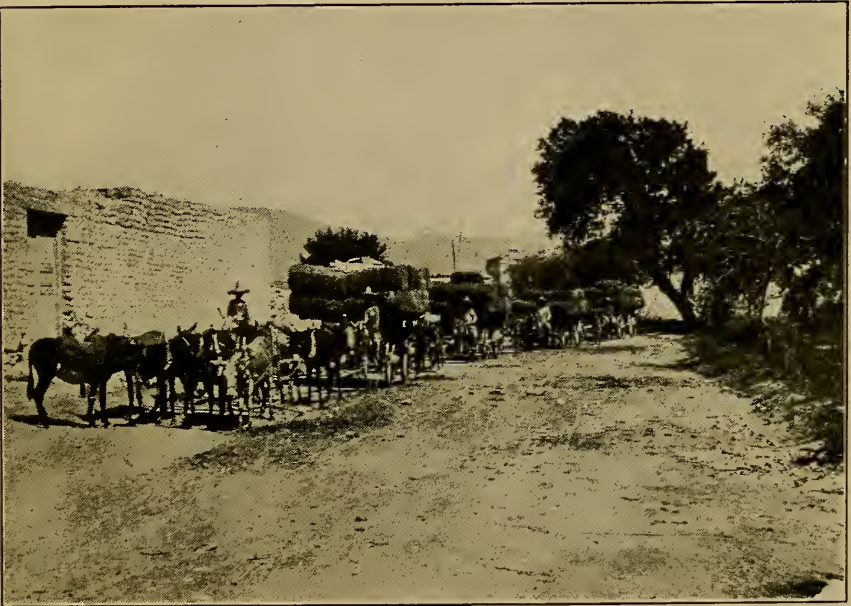
limits, there is nothing to indicate with certainty the cause thereof.

Finally the lowing and bellowing of cattle discloses the fact that a band of horned stock is making its way slowly along the highway, coming, as was subsequently developed, from the remote fastnesses of the desert mountains, where they had been reared among the wildest surroundings, their only knowledge of civilization being the infrequent sight of a vaquero from whom they had fled in terror. Such a thing as a town, with its aggregation of houses and humans, was as foreign to them as the life that possibly exists upon the moon is to the earth dweller.

They are leg weary and thirsty from their long journey. So too are the vaqueros and their horses. They have pushed the animals in order to reach the cattle corrals at the railroad station before dark, until, frightened by the unusual sights and sounds of the town, the beasts are on the verge of a stampede. The horsemen urge the unwilling animals down the street, nursing them carefully at each crossing in order to hold them together and prevent disaster. Thus they come along the thoroughfare until the corner of the plaza is reached. The desert-bred animals sniff the air and the dust.



Pack Train Carrying Firewood to Town



Guayule Train Coming into Town from the Desert

The odor is not to their liking, it is so different from the pure, resinous air of the desert. They bawl and bellow, they toss their heads and roll their bloodshot eyes from side to side, lashing their bodies with their tails, prodding each other with their horns, and evincing every indication of readiness to break into a panic at the slightest provocation. The situation is tense and fraught with danger.

There is a musically inclined individual living in a house that fronts on the plaza who is wont to while away the evening hours and wear away his neighbors' nerves at the same time by eliciting strange noises from the depths of a brass instrument of some sort, the like of which were never heard on land or sea, and which were well calculated to bring panic and fear to animals far more accustomed to the unusual than a band of desert raised bovines.

Ignorant of the impending advent of the weary, nervous, half-crazed cattle, this individual establishes himself on the sidewalk in front of his doorway, puts the mouthpiece of the instrument of torture to his face, draws a deep breath, and then—With a long drawn shriek and moan which would have put the most powerful foghorn to blush,

if foghorns can blush, he rent the evening air, tore it to tatters. The cattle halted suddenly and simultaneously. What hellish trap was this into which they were being led! They had seen and heard strange and weird things since striking the outposts of civilization, but nothing like this. They stood breathless and motionless for a second or two, then with a chorus of wildest bellowings of fright they stampeded. Down the street they came, hell bent for the plaza. The vaqueros rode on the sidewalks and among them, seeking in vain to hold the crazed animals together. At each corner some broke away and dashed down the side streets, but the main body rushed plaza-ward.

Shouts of warning were uttered, yells and curses were hurled at the unconscious cause, who did not realize what he had done until the leaders, with lowered heads and elevated tails, were close upon him. Then into the house he went at one jump, slamming the door just in time to escape serious and more or less deserved damage.

Through the plaza the animals tore, the people fleeing in panic, climbing the trees, hiding in ditches, running to shelter in every direction. Dignity was scattered to the winds. Safety first was the predominant idea with all. "El Gringo"

saw and heard them coming. He had seen and heard such things before on a California cattle ranch and knew something about the danger therefrom. Diagonally across the street from his seat, in an opposite direction from the church, was the "hoozegow," or jail, with doors and windows of iron bars—no more. He had never had any very friendly feeling for such institutions, except when confining law breakers of unusual hideousness of conduct, but in the emergency—the condition and not the theory—that now confronted him and his companions, the wide open door took on a most inviting aspect. The heavy iron bars looked good enough to him—real good in fact—just as they apparently did to half a dozen others. There was a simultaneous thought in the mind of each, there was a simultaneous dash for the open doorway, and there was a simultaneous arrival at the desired point. All reached it at the same instant and all sought to pass through it with as little unnecessary delay as possible. Forgotten were the niceties and politenesses of ordinary every-day intercourse. Forgotten was the delightful habit of stepping to one side on the narrow walk or in the doorway, saluting another and bidding him to pass first. Quite excusable was this forgetfulness. With a bunch of

mad cattle close at one's heels, bawling and bellowing, just one instinct remained—that of self-preservation. So we all tried to get through the door together, became wedged therein, struggled frantically, but finally managed to squeeze through, then slammed the grating shut and from this secure point of vantage watched the proceedings in the street.

Through the plaza the animals tore, the people fleeing in panic, climbing trees, hiding in ditches, running to shelter in every direction. Aided by some mounted men, the vaqueros finally managed to round up most of the animals, and it was decided to herd them into a corral in the middle of the town and not to attempt to drive them to the railroad station until morning, when they would have become quiet and more manageable. After a long time spent in coaxing, persuading and gently urging the cattle, they were at length all driven through the gateway to the corral, with a single exception. This was a big black bull of fearsome aspect, who sullenly maintained his stand in the center of the street and contrary to general cattle usage refused to follow his companions. The vaqueros surrounded him, hit him with their reatas and quirts,

swore at him and sought in vain in some manner to persuade him to move.

Finally one rash individual inflicted the crowning indignity upon his bullship. He seized the animal's tail near the root, and gave it an energetic and spiteful twist. That was all he did, but it was amply sufficient. He took no part in the subsequent performances. It was quite late in the evening before he was able to sit up and ask how the town had fared during the earthquake and what a pity it was that the church had been destroyed and fragments of the tower had fallen upon him—such incidents being almost unknown here!

With a roar and a bellow, the bull, having first kicked his tormentor into unconsciousness, went tearing down the street. Every living object that met his view was a target for prompt attack. An inoffensive burro standing meekly by the roadside was struck squarely amidship and sent rolling into the opposite gutter. A horse or two met a like fate. Two or three men were bowled over, but fortunately the maddened animal was too bewildered, too anxious to get away from the town and into the familiar wilderness to permit of a moment's unnecessary stop. So they escaped uninjured except for painful bruises. Fortunately for all, the angry

bull did not halt to gore any of the objects of his wrath. He had no spite against them that would lead him to desire their lives. He was in a desperate hurry, they were merely in his way, and they must get out of his path—that was all.

Never was such a sight seen outside of the bull-ring. Women ran screaming to snatch their panic stricken children out of harm's way. Men sought places of safety no matter where or how. Half of the double door of a tailor shop stood open, too narrow to admit of the animal's entrance, but he charged at it, was caught for a minute by one of his horns becoming entangled, stayed long enough to receive full in the face a brasero full of burning charcoal used for heating the tailor's "goose," withdrew with a bellow of added pain and rage, and then dashed on. By this time some of the vaqueros had recovered from their momentary panic and with reatas widely swinging came galloping down the street. Two were in the lead, and with a quick gesture from one to the other they ranged up one on each side, cast their reatas with unerring accuracy, then reined their horses back on their haunches, and braced themselves for the shock. It came. The bull was halted so suddenly that he turned a complete somersault, landing squarely on

his head and then falling heavily on his back. While the vaqueros tautened their ropes and held him harmless on the ground, another jumped quickly from his horse, drew a keen edged knife, and at one slash almost severed the animal's head from his body, the while one last resounding bellow of anger and pain went hurtling down the street.

Oh it was *some* idyll—this stampede of the desert cattle—and for a long time it was used as a landmark from which to date other events of less importance, or at all events with less thrill.



Idyll Sixteenth

A CHILD'S FAITH IN DON PORFIRIO



It is early one morning—about nine o'clock. I have completed my “constitutional” of fifteen times around the plaza. Five complete circuits of the little park equal one mile in a direct line, as they do in the majority of similar cases in the Republic. Fifteen times is one league, more or less, or three miles. Sometimes when it is quite cool I make an even twenty laps, four miles, and it is done in a trifle less than one hour. Sometimes I have company, and sometimes not, but as it is the only dustless walk in the town, every morning and evening sees me “lapping” around the plaza. The evenings are the hardest part of the day in which to “kill time.” Every one is off the streets usually by eight; a few dim acetylene lights here and there only serve to accentuate the gloom of the town. Not being permitted to read, either by daylight or lamplight, nothing remains but the plaza. The church clock



A Mexican Bride

strikes the hours and the quarters, the first in a deep tone, the others in one of lighter sound. Thus, at 9.15 the clock strikes once in a silvery tone, followed by nine blows in the deeper tone of the hour. So when one wakes at night he can listen for the quarter to strike and can tell the time exactly. The clock strikes twice for the half-hour and three times for the three-quarters. Ten-thirty is the hour I have set for retiring, as I had found it impossible to sleep before that time, and the weary, dreary hours from dark until the time selected are about as weary and dreary as can be imagined. I walk from one end of the block upon which I live to the other over and over, and then cross to the plaza and walk around and around and around again. I listen to the striking of the clock as the quarters reel off, oh so slowly, and long for the chosen moment to come for going to bed. Finally it comes, the whole town is silent as a tomb, and I go to my room and to sleep.

Long before nine next morning I am up, bathed, breakfasted, walked, and in my reserved seat in the shelter of the china-berry, for by that time the sun is well up, its rays are scorching and there is no comfort except in the shade.

On this particular morning I am there with my

customary companion, and as usual at intervals of twenty to thirty minutes I stroll to the middle of the highway and look off toward the mountain pass in the hope that the expected cloud of dust may materialize into the hoped-for wagon train of guayule shrub. The price of rubber has gone up, so has the price of the plant from which it is produced, and my principals have urged me to hurry forward every possible ton, in order that it may be converted into coin. What this means may be judged from the fact that in no very great time the market value of the shrub has increased from \$30 to \$200 and more per ton.

But there is no dust in the distance, and so I resume my seat. Soon comes little seven-year-old Jose Maria, with trouble, dire trouble, writ plain and large on his childish countenance. There is even a suspicion of tears and it is with difficulty he suppresses his sobs as he tells his tale of woe.

Addressing us both after politely exchanging the usual salutations, as Mexican children always do, he asks:

“Have you seen my kid this morning?”

A little inquiry develops the fact that an aunt had given him a kid as a playmate and that the little chap had straightway fallen in love with it. He had

petted it, fed it and even kept it in the house by his side at night. But his mother had finally been obliged to banish it to the corral. Here little Jose Maria had walled off a sheltered nook with adobe bricks, had arranged some straw for its bed, and at night, after feeding his pet, had left it in supposed safety to sleep until morning. This had been going on for some time, but this morning when Jose Maria went to give the pet kid its breakfast, the animal was missing and could not be found anywhere, though he had searched for hours. Now he was going about town and asking every one whom he knew if they had seen his kid. He was heart broken over the mysterious disappearance.

We suggested that he should go to the residence of his aunt who had given him the pet, as it was reasonable to suppose that it might have wandered back to its birthplace. The bereaved little chap hastened thither, but in about half an hour returned again, the picture of grief. No kid had been seen. He had examined the entire flock in the corral and his particular pet was not among the number.

"Well, then," said Don Martin, "it must be that your kid has been stolen."

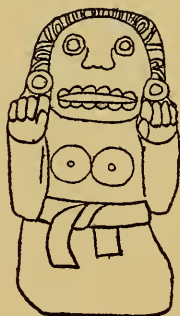
"Stolen! How stolen? Who would steal my kid?"

98 SEEN IN A MEXICAN PLAZA

“Oh, there are thieves here who might steal it to eat.”

“What?” with consternation, surprise and disbelief written all over his face. “Thieves in this town? Thieves here? Is Don Porfirio then dead, that there should be thieves in Cuatro Cienegas?”

And there was a whole volume in this childish expression of disillusionment and loss of confidence.



Idyll Seventeenth

THE INTERESTING PROCESS OF MANUFACTURING CANDLES



BETWEEN the house of "El Gringo"—that ancient structure in which he never went to sleep without picturing in his mind the heroic fight put up in the very room in which he slept, between four brave patriots intrenched therein and upward of 200 enemies, howling on the outside for their blood—and his private settee in the shade of the china-berry tree, were several places of business of one kind and another. Among these was one where the stranger often halted to watch the industry therein carried on and to exchange a few words of greeting with the genial, gray-haired man who constituted in his own person the proprietor, manager, foreman and entire working force of a candle manufactory. In his younger days in a pioneer community it had been one of "El Gringo's"

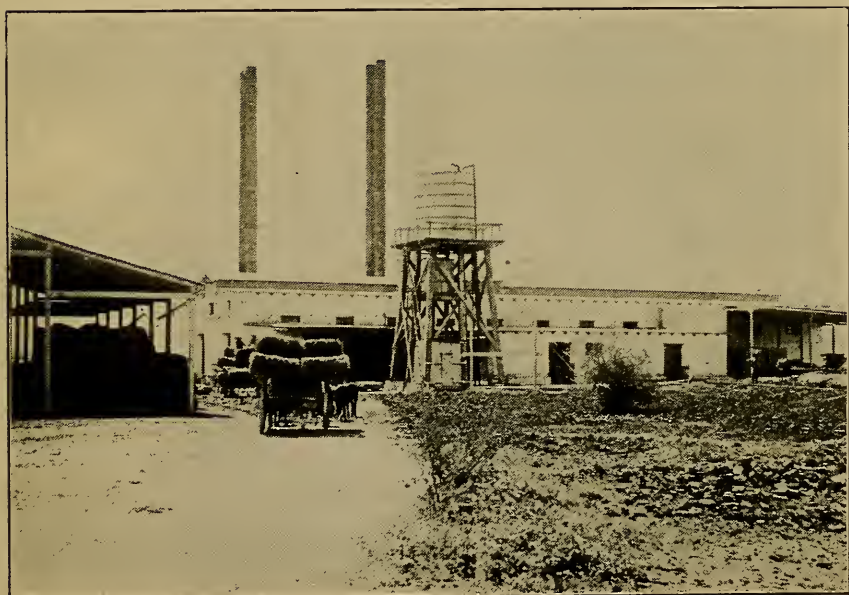
“chores” to assist in the preparation of the battery of tin molds, the tying of the wicks to the wooden cross pieces, and the pouring of the melted tallow, by which slow and laborious process candles were evolved—the only means of illumination known at that time, which was before the “invention” of petroleum as an illuminant.

But this Cuatro Cienegas candle manufactory was of a different type. A great empty room, perhaps 20 or 24 feet square, opened off the street with a wide double door. With the exceptions to be described, it was entirely without furniture or appliances of any kind. Into a massive beam overhead at a spot in the exact center of the high ceiling, was fastened an iron swivel hook which turned freely in any direction. From this hook several heavy cords made of ixtli fiber spread in cone-shaped fashion and were attached to a great wooden hoop that completely filled the room, with the exception, of course, of the corners. This hoop was suspended in an exactly horizontal position at a height of about four feet above the floor, and a single motion of the hand could send it spinning around and around until one became dizzy watching it, if he so wished.

At intervals of about six inches apart, coarsely



Hauling Vegetable Wax Plants to the Factory



Guayule Rubber Factory at Cuatro Ciénegas

and loosely spun bits of cotton cordage were tied to the hoop, which was of very light material and hung down some 10 inches or thereabouts. On a box in one corner of the room where the curve of the hoop left considerable space, the proprietor-manager-foreman-working force sat. Just in front of him was a brasero with a small charcoal fire supporting an earthen vessel filled with melted tallow. Any kind of animal fat answered the purpose. With a ladle in one hand, the candle-maker turned the hoop a trifle with the other until one of the dependent wicks was exactly over the tallow-filled vessel. Then he filled the ladle and poured it on the upper end of the wick, allowing the liquid to run down into the vessel, during which process a small quantity congealed and remained adhering to the wick. After many operations of this kind the tallow began to assume something of the proportions of a candle, but it required hours of patient toil, and continuous turning and ladling and pouring, before candles of proper size were at last produced. These were not symmetrical in shape, as when cast in a mold, but when completed were about the diameter of an ordinary lead pencil at the top, gradually increasing in size until at the lower end they were an inch or so in thickness. The

melted tallow, being hot when applied at the upper extremity of the candle, ran rapidly downward, but cooled quickly in the process, thus causing the candle to become much thicker at the base than at the top. After the candles had attained a sufficient size they were detached from the hoop, the base was cut off squarely with a sharp knife, and then they were ready for sale in the market. As these brought a very low price by comparison with the imported articles made of paraffin or other substances, it was very plain to me that the pathway to wealth followed so earnestly by this gray-haired manager-proprietor-foreman-working force would be a very long one. It is possible that he may have realized a profit of as much as a dollar daily, but of this I have serious doubts, as the entire output of the factory for a day could have been easily carried away in a man's arms. Many weary hours were required in order to produce a single batch of candles, but the jolly manufacturer never seemed to tire of his task, while his friends happened along with regularity and halted for a bit of gossip or to smoke a cigarette with him, thus helping the time to pass.

SOMETHING ABOUT MATCHES

Of cognate character was a match manufactory. Mexican-made matches, as most people are perhaps not aware, are an entirely different thing from the ordinary match of the rest of the world. The average Mexican match is an inch to an inch and a quarter in length. It is made with a cotton cord coated with melted wax and is about one-sixteenth of an inch in diameter. It is double-headed, that is, has phosphorus at each end, and every match may be used twice. One can light a cigarette or a cigar, or start a fire, then extinguish the flame, return the match to the box and preserve it for the next time. Being constituted as they are, these matches can be used in the open air with much more assurance than the ordinary imported wooden match. They can be lighted and will remain burning in the face of a very strong wind, which with the other variety of match would be impossible. In the majority of factories these matches are made by machines, but in small towns everything is done by hand. The raw cotton is spun into threads and dozen of girls and boys are employed in the slow and laborious work of molding and tipping the matches.

Speaking of matches, by the way, it is within the memory of people still living that such things were not known, and the old-fashioned flint and steel were the sole dependence for starting a fire. The story is told that when matches were first imported an enterprising storekeeper laid in a supply and endeavored to introduce them to his customers. One day an old chap from a ranch some 20 or 25 miles distant dropped in and the dealer produced some of the wonderful novelties. He emphasized the ease with which a light could be obtained in comparison with the slow process of flint and steel, and as an illustration casually scratched a match on the leg of his trousers, saying: "See how easily you can get a light with one of these matches!" But the *ranchero* demurred and could not be persuaded. "You say it will save time? Not so! How could I come to town and have you make a light on your trousers leg every time I wanted a fire? No, no; I will use my flint and steel!"

Idyll Eighteenth

A HOT-WATER BATH IN A BOTTOMLESS PIT

“LET us go for a bath!”



To “El Gringo,” sitting in the shade of the china-berry tree in the plaza at Cuatro Cienegas, came two

friends with this proposal.

Now, an invitation of that kind may seem a trifle odd and mystifying to the stranger. Asking an acquaintance to “take a drink” or “have a smoke” is common enough in any portion of the world, but to invite one to take a bath might seem to open the way to some invidious comment, or possibly it might even be resented! Especially if a bath really were needed!

Not so in Cuatro Cienegas, as will be seen!

It is getting late in the fall. The torrid heat of the summer sun is tempered by the delightful breezes that blow up and down the valley—in one uniform direction by day and in the opposite course

after nightfall. The delicious grapes and other fruits produced here in abundance are at their best and we revel in them day after day. Such juicy fruit of the vine, such luscious figs, such pears and plums and peaches, and what not! A few leaves are falling—but only a few. In a land where comes not either frost or hail or snow, and only on rare occasions any rain—or if it does it is so gentle as not to be unwelcome—there are no sharp changes of the seasons. They melt into one another so gradually that the summer is past and gone, the harvest is over and done, autumn is in full tide, the “winter” even comes, and we only know it by the calendar and by the advent of All Souls’ Day—Mexico’s national Decoration Day—and by the coming of Noche Buena, or Christmas, later on.

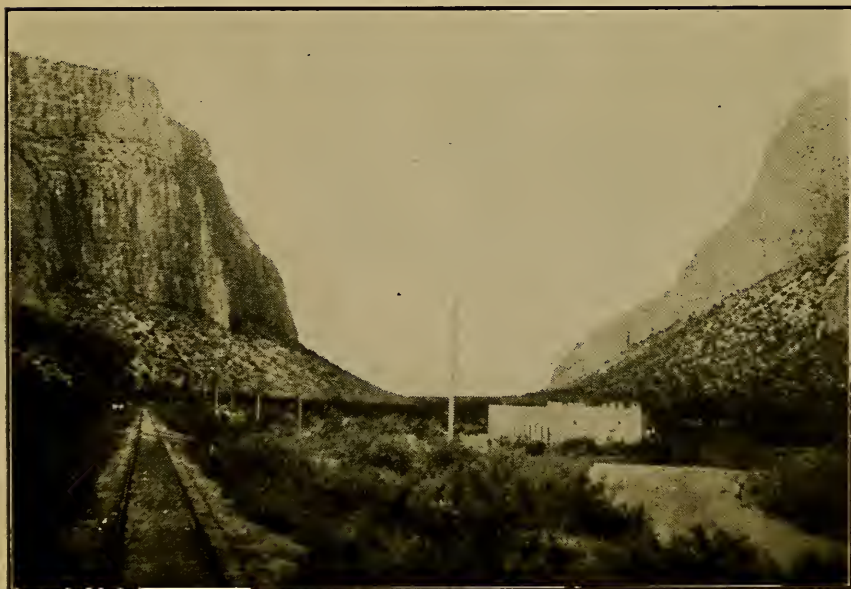
It is a lovely, genial mid-October forenoon, and the invitation to a bath comes to willing ears.

But the reader must not be mistaken about it! A bath in the United States and one in Cuatro Ciénegas are vastly different things. About the only similarity is that both are wet! In other respects it would be difficult to imagine anything at greater variance from the rule in such matters than the bath there.

First, we hustle about for towels, then start on a



Municipal Building in Cuatro Cienegas



Picturesque Canyon on Railway from Monclova to Cuatro Cienegas

little journey of a dozen or so miles out into the barren valley, hiring a "coach" and a couple of tough little mules for the occasion. "Machines" are an unknown quantity at this time and in this region.

Then we drive through the vineyard-covered outskirts of the town, raising several coveys of fat quail as we pass; but we do not stop for the tempting shot, as we are intent on bathing and not on hunting. Then rapidly through a belt of fertile farming land, and then finally out into the unsettled valley prairies, where thousands of acres are covered with a snow-white efflorescence interspersed with "sinks" heavily encrusted with varicolored crystallizations. We cross the "Salon de las Brujas"—which, being interpreted, resolves itself into "The Dancing Place of the Witches"—an appropriate designation, as will be explained. It being broad daylight, none of the "witches" are in evidence! It is only after nightfall that they disport themselves! Then, across the solidly encrusted ice-like surface of the salon, the brisk wind brings little twisting columns of the loose white salts, which flit hither and yon over the rolling valley surface and require little enough imagination on the part of the superstitious natives to become endowed with super-

natural and malicious life. Especially if the native be returning home after a day spent among the wine cellars or cantinas of Cuatro Cienegas and many "copitas" have been absorbed of the heady, but it must be confessed in many cases appetizingly seductive, products of the vineyards.

Beyond the resort of the putative witches the road winds endlessly on and on toward the distant purple hills, which do not seem to become one whit nearer even after an hour or two of steady jogging travel. Mesquite thickets line the road and give shelter to a frequent rabbit or a bunch of quail or cooing doves, while from some overflowed land in the distance rise swarms of ducks and geese, which promise "good hunting" when the occasion offers. Then out from the thickets we pass onto a level plain covered with coarse clumps of sedge grass, through which we wind our way until the bathing place is reached. If it be the first visit of a stranger, it is an odd enough experience. If, however, he be familiar with the wonderful natural phenomenon that greets the eye, it still is of interest. One never tires of it.

Suddenly and without any sort of warning the coach halts on the brink of as strange and wonderful a pool as can be imagined. All around is dry

and barren, yet here is a circular basin, some 150 feet in diameter, rounded as if laid out by an engineer. The brown sedge grass hangs heavy over the brim, and there is a straight drop of three or four feet to the surface of the water. And that water! Blue it is as the sky! Blue as indigo! And as the wind ruffles across its surface, if it be a cool day, light clouds of vapor arise and are borne hither and thither, for the water is hot—hot as blazes! At the edges the pool is two or three feet in depth, but the bottom slopes with the most perfect regularity at an angle of about forty-five degrees to the center, and it is snow white! A pure dazzling white, which, with the deep blue of the water, presents a most entrancing picture. Away down deep in the center, many, many feet below the surface, is a ragged crater-like opening through which pours a constant supply of water from the depths below, whose extent can be gauged by the fact that through an open cut at one side a ditch passes which is some six feet in width and carries a flow two feet deep.

The bottom and sides of the pool are, as stated, snow white in color. The substance of which they are composed is smooth and greasy to the touch, and upon examination is found to consist largely

of minute spiral shells, many of microscopic dimensions. In some places the deposit has a beautiful light salmon color of the most delicate hue. There is not a particle of grit and the material may be used instead of soap, possessing remarkable detergent qualities. One plasters it liberally upon his entire body, and then plunges into the hot water of the pool, the result being a most satisfactory and beneficial bath. There is only one drawback; one never knows when to quit! The whole sensation is so agreeable and so different from anything of the sort ever before encountered, that it is with reluctance you finally, after playing about in the water for an hour or more, emerge, don your clothes and regretfully turn Cuatro Cienegasward.

While no analysis of this water has ever been made, so far at least as the writer knows, it has been demonstrated to possess curative properties of value. The famous General Escobedo, one of Benito Juarez's most valiant and valuable aids, in his revolutionary war, sought refuge at one time in this valley, and remained there for a considerable period. Being afflicted with a severe attack of inflammatory rheumatism, and hearing the fame possessed among the natives by the pool, he established a camp on the bank of the basin. A rude stone hut


(still standing, by the way, in a ruinous condition) was thrown up, and a channel was excavated from the pool to the building, in order to conduct the water thither. In the floor of the hut a deep basin was hollowed out in the solid rock, and into this a constant stream of the hot water passed. The sufferer was accustomed to recline in this basin for hours at a time, in fact the entire day being passed in this manner, thus soaking his pain-racked body until it must have been completely saturated. The result was that in a few weeks the military leader was entirely restored to health and was again able to take the field. Since that time the pool has been generally known as the "Baths of Escobedo," and the natives come from far and wide to lave in its waters, as well as to thoroughly cleanse anything of a textile nature that needs renovation, with the least possible outlay of time and labor.

And of such is the bath that "El Gringo" was invited to enjoy by his friends in Cuatro Cienegas! And did enjoy it many times!

It is well worth traveling hundreds of miles!

Idyll Nineteenth

TRAGIC ENDING OF A TRANQUIL SUMMER

ND then suddenly, unexpectedly, with no premonition, no warning, like the shock of an earthquake, came the tragic ending of these peaceful, restful months. One whose life has flowed on evenly, steadily, with none but the usual incidents in regular and natural order, can have no idea of what it means to be shocked by the sudden and unheralded announcement of the violent death of one's closest associate, who but a few short days previously had been in the best of health; had bidden his companion a hearty good-bye; who had a family whom he loved and by whom he was in turn adored; who was comparatively young and who had from every outward indication a long life of business success and happiness before him. And when the truth about that death is a mystery and must always remain so, despite close and careful investigation,

the shock is all the greater and its effects all the more lasting. They never pass away, but ever remain as a dark cloud in the memory.

It was on a lovely, peaceful, quiet Sunday afternoon. The plaza was thronged, as the band was about to begin its regular musical program, under the direction, by the way, of an expert musician whose name is attached to some of the most popular airs in Mexico, but whose unfortunate failings—the failings of a genius—had doomed him to an obscure existence in this out-of-the-way place.

I had been sitting ever since the close of the siesta hour on my favorite settee, idly watching the passing throng, receiving and exchanging salutations, and never dreaming that my summer's idyll was close to an abrupt end. Some sudden impulse prompted me to cross the street and pay a call upon Don Martin at his residence—something I had never before done on a Sunday in all the time I had resided here.

I had not been in the patio five minutes before the telephone bell in the entrance to the house rang, and my host answered it. I heard an exclamation of surprise, then a hurried conversation in agitated tones, and then Don Martin came back to where I was sitting and stood speechless for a moment or

two. Glancing at his face, I saw a look of consternation upon it and noted that he was greatly disturbed for some reason. He hesitated a few moments and then said:

"Oh, Señor Semanas, I have some very bad news for you! I do not know how to tell it. It is shocking."

"Tell me quickly," I replied. "Bad news is best told at once. I am used to it." As indeed I was, and was to become even more inured in the coming years.

"Your partner out on the desert is dead—shot! He killed himself or was killed early this morning at his camp on the Fortuna hacienda, a hundred miles out. The Judge at Ocampo has just received the news and asked me to tell you."

Further conversation over the telephone with the official in the town named, over forty miles distant, disclosed the fact that the Chinese cook, who was the only person with the dead man at the time, was under arrest, while stoutly maintaining his innocence of crime and declaring that it was a case of suicide, though he acknowledged he heard but did not see the fatal shot fired. But there was no reason why the victim should have wished to end his life. Indeed, the reasons were all of an opposite

character; he had every inducement to cling closely to existence.

No amount of investigation, however, disclosed anything to contradict the story of the Chinaman, and as there were no other witnesses, he was finally discharged from custody at my request, though I was required to give a bond to produce him at any time if further investigation should be deemed desirable. Nothing however was ever done in the matter, and the case went into the same category with the many other mysteries of the desert wherever there is a desert, in the United States as well as elsewhere. No region is so prolific of the unsolved problems of human life and death.

But the tragedy necessitated changes which soon put an end to my stay in Cuatro Cienegas, and it was with genuine regret that I gave up my familiar seat under the china-berry tree, paid farewell visits to my friends, and finally left the place which had so endeared itself to me, and undertook a long and arduous journey *via* muleback among the fastnesses of the Sierra Madre and the jungles of the West Coast—little known regions—and which it is intended to deal with at length in another volume.

Last of the Idylls

A PEON WOMAN'S PHILOSOPHY AND IDEAS OF WEALTH



IN connection with the tragic end of my sojourn in Cuatro Cienegas, an interesting incident occurred illustrating the character of the despised peon (only despised by those who do not know him or her).

During all my stay in the town my laundry work had been performed by a poor woman of the peon class—the last person to whom any one would credit the possession of any depth of feeling. To her, when turning over at her request the blood-stained effects of the dead man, and which she eagerly welcomed, I casually remarked in discussing the details of the tragedy, that a sum of money in which I was equal owner had disappeared at the death of my associate. I had no intention whatever of complaining or bemoaning the loss, but merely mentioned it as an interesting and perhaps suspicious

circumstance in connection with the mystery. But she evidently thought I was lamenting my monetary misfortune, for she looked at me a moment in silence and apparent surprise, not unmixed with reproach. Then she said:

"Why, Señor, *you* ought not to complain because you have lost some money, no matter how much! Your companion lost *all he had*—his life!"

Could any one equal that for sympathy or philosophy? I hastened to disabuse her mind of the idea that I had any thought of complaining, for even though she was but a peon, I assuredly wished to justify myself in her eyes and not leave her with a wrong impression as to my feelings regarding the death of my associate.

This same laundress, Maria was her name, had taken advantage of the fact that she had a "regular" patron who always paid "C. O. D." for her services, and essayed to purchase a sewing machine, that *ultima thule* of the average Mexican housewife's ambition, obtaining it upon the "installment" plan. This is a serious task for a peon, since the unconscionable price of \$140 was demanded therefor by the agent of the only company of the kind that has obtained much of a foothold in that country. And when it is remembered that at the time of

which I write a dollar a day was considered good wages for an able-bodied man, while the average in the Cuatro Cienegas section was not fifty cents a day, one can see what a burden was assumed when an agreement was made to buy a sewing machine on monthly payments of even five dollars.

It was Maria's custom to come to me the first of each month when the installment fell due and ask me to advance the five dollars necessary to discharge her liability, the amount so advanced to be deducted from that subsequently earned over, not the wash *board*, but the wash *stone*. This went on satisfactorily until she had made a very material reduction in her indebtedness.

But when the time came that I was to leave she was sorely puzzled. It chanced to be just as an installment was due, and Maria came to me about it. I told her that I could not advance the money, as I was only to be in town a week longer and she would not have sufficient opportunity to earn the amount, while I could not afford to lose it.

"Oh, but that makes no difference to *you*, Señor. You are very rich and I am very poor, and you can afford to lose so small an amount as five dollars."

"Why, Maria," I replied, "I am not rich. I am poorer than you think. I have very little."

"Oh, no, Señor," she replied, "I *know* you are very rich!"

"Now, Maria, that is not so. You are very much mistaken. But how rich do you think I am? How much do you think I gain in a month?"

She gave me a long look of appraisal, studied me from head to foot, hesitated for a moment, evidently concluded to venture the maximum, and then said:

"Very well, Señor. I think you must have as much as a hundred pesos a month!" (The equivalent of fifty dollars in American currency.)

This was manifestly the uttermost limit of her idea as to what constituted great wealth. And no wonder. For in this town the average public employee or store worker considered himself fortunate indeed if he received from \$40 to \$50 per month, and the common peon did not average 50 cents a day the year round—worth half that in gold.

Maria got her five dollars!

And so passed the summer's idyll of an idle summer.

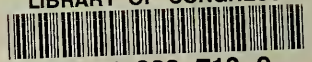
THE LEAVE-TAKING

My friend Don Martin was kind enough to say to me when we parted: "Señor Semanas, I wish to tell you something. Every one of my fellow-countrymen for a hundred miles around Cuatro Cienegas knows you, and they all call you 'El Gringo.' They do not do this to show disrespect, but because you are the only stranger in the place, and your name is difficult for them to pronounce (they spoke it as if it were spelled Huiquis—indeed some wrote it that way). So they content themselves by calling you as I have said. But every one in all this region likes you and is your friend, because you have treated them as if they were men."

Incidentally, I may add that this is all *any* Mexican asks.



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